

GEORGES SIMENON

The Strangers in the House



PENGUIN
CLASSICS



Georges Simenon

THE STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

Translated by Howard Curtis



Contents

Part One

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7

Part Two

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5

About the Author

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. He is best known in Britain as the author of the Maigret novels, and his prolific output of over 400 novels and short stories has made him a household name in continental Europe. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

The Strangers in the House

‘I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov’

– William Faulkner

‘A truly wonderful writer ... marvellously readable – lucid, simple, absolutely in tune with the world he creates’

– Muriel Spark

‘Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the bleakness of human life’

– A. N. Wilson

‘One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century ... Simenon was unequalled at making us look inside, though the ability was masked by his brilliance at absorbing us obsessively in his stories’

– *Guardian*

‘A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part of it’

– Peter Ackroyd

‘The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in literature’

– André Gide

‘Superb ... The most addictive of writers ... A unique teller of tales’

– *Observer*

‘The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all their disconcerting complexity’

– Anita Brookner

‘A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined a high literary reputation with popular appeal’

– P. D. James

‘A supreme writer ... Unforgettable vividness’

– *Independent*

‘Compelling, remorseless, brilliant’

– John Gray

‘Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century’

– John Banville



Part One

‘Hello? Rogissart?’

The public prosecutor was standing by the bed in his nightshirt, his wife looking up at him in surprise. He was cold all over, but especially his feet: he had got up so abruptly, he hadn’t found his slippers.

‘Who is this?’ he said into the receiver.

He frowned at the answer and repeated for his wife’s benefit:

‘Loursat? Is that you, Hector?’

Intrigued, his wife pushed back the blanket and reached out a long, excessively white arm to the other earpiece.

‘What did you say?’

Maître Loursat, Madame Rogissart’s first cousin, calmly announced:

‘I’ve just found a stranger in my house. In a bed on the second floor. He was dying when I got there. You’re going to have to deal with it, Gérard. I’m really sorry. I think he might have been murdered.’

When the prosecutor hung up, Laurence Rogissart, who hated her cousin, said:

‘He’s drunk again!’

And yet that evening, everything had appeared to be in its place, especially as it was raining, which added to the general feeling of stagnation. It was the first cold rain of the season, which meant that, apart from a few loving couples, the cinema in Rue d’Allier hadn’t had any patrons. The box-office lady was all the more furious at being stuck inside her glass cage for no reason, freezing as she watched the raindrops falling past the globe-shaped lights.

Moulins was the Moulins of early October. In the various hotels – the Hôtel de Paris, the Dauphin, the Allier – commercial travellers ate from fixed-price menus, served by girls in black dresses, black stockings and

white aprons. Every now and again, a car passed in the street, on the way to somewhere: Nevers, Clermont, perhaps even Paris.

The shops were all shut, and the rain fell on their signs: the huge red hat at Bluchet's, Tellier's giant stopwatch, the gold horse's head over the horse-meat butcher's.

The whistle heard behind the houses was the local train from Montluçon, with barely ten passengers on board.

At the Prefecture, a dinner was being held for about twenty: the monthly dinner, regularly attended by the same guests.

Most shutters were closed, and there weren't many people at lighted windows. What few footsteps there were in the maze of rain-slicked streets were furtive, almost ashamed.

Standing at the corner of a street filled with notaries and lawyers, the house of the Loursats – the Loursat de Saint-Marc, to be precise – appeared even drowsier, even more secretive than the others, with its wings, its paved courtyard separated from the street by a high wall, and in this courtyard, in the middle of an empty ornamental pond, an Apollo that no longer spat water through the tube sticking out of his mouth.

In the dining room on the first floor, Hector Loursat sat with his stooped back to the fireplace, in which lumps of coal were burning on a grate, giving off yellowish smoke.

He had bags under his eyes, pretty much as on any other evening, and his eyes themselves were watery, making his gaze vague and disturbing.

The table was round, the tablecloth white. Facing Loursat, his daughter Nicole ate with calm, glum concentration.

Neither spoke. Loursat was a messy eater, bent over his plate as if to graze, chewing noisily, sighing occasionally with boredom or fatigue.

When he had finished with one dish, he pushed back his chair a little in order to make space for his belly and waited.

It was so obvious that he was waiting, it became a signal for Nicole to turn slightly towards the maid, who was standing by the wall.

At this, the maid opened a hatch and shouted into the dumb waiter:
'Next!'

Downstairs, deep in the grey kitchen, which was vaulted like a chapel, a thin, ugly little woman eating at the end of a table stood up, took a dish from the oven and slid it into the dumb waiter.

As always happened, after a few metres the mechanism stalled: something had jammed, and the operation had to be restarted several times until by some miracle the maid, waiting upstairs, saw the expected food arrive at last.

The chimney didn't draw. The house was full of things that either didn't work or worked badly.

They were all aware of it.

His elbows on the table, Loursat heaved a sigh each time the dumb waiter broke down, and, whenever a gust of wind made the smoke from the coal billow, Nicole showed her displeasure by tapping on the table.

'Well, Angèle?'

'Here you are, Mademoiselle.'

Nicole drank white wine from the carafe, while her father served himself from a bottle of Burgundy, timing things so that he would finish it during the meal.

'Could Mademoiselle settle my wages straight after dinner?'

Loursat listened, although without paying undue attention. He barely knew the maid, a tall girl, stronger than those they were used to, well-built, energetic and happily disrespectful.

'Did you fill out your book?'

'I gave it back to Fine.'

Fine was Joséphine, the grimacing dwarf downstairs who was sending the dishes up.

'Very well.'

Loursat didn't ask his daughter why the maid was leaving, if she had handed in her notice herself or was being dismissed. There was a new maid every two weeks, but he didn't care.

He ate boiled chestnuts and managed to get them all over his black velvet smoking jacket. Not that it mattered: the jacket was already filthy. They could hear water dripping in a drainpipe – probably another thing that needed repairing.

Once he had finished his chestnuts, Loursat waited a moment to make sure there was nothing else to eat, rolled his napkin into a ball, put it down on the table – he could never be bothered to fold it – and stood up.

It was the same thing every evening, without the slightest variation. He didn't look at Nicole. Already turned towards the door, he muttered:

'Good night.'

By now his gait was heavy and stumbling. Since morning, Loursat had had time to drink two or three bottles of Burgundy, more likely three, always the same kind, which he would go down and fetch from the cellar as soon as he woke and cautiously bring upstairs.

Anyone watching outside could have followed his progress from the slivers of light filtering through the shutters one after the other, leading eventually to his study, the last room in the right wing.

The door of the study was padded, and always had been, ever since the days of Loursat's father, who was also a lawyer, perhaps even since the days of his grandfather, who had been mayor of the town for twenty years. The black percale was torn in places, like an old country billiard table.

In the fireplace, instead of andirons or a grating, they had once, for some reason, had to temporarily install a little cast-iron stove, and there it had remained, with its curved pipe.

It purred and soon grew red, and occasionally Loursat approached it as he might approach an obedient dog, fed it hearty shovelfuls of coal and crouched to poke it.

The local train from Montluçon had left. Another whistle sounded across the town, but it was only a goods train. A film flickered on the screen for the few people scattered around the cinema auditorium, which smelt of wet clothes. The prefect led his guests to the smoking room and opened a box of cigars.

Prosecutor Rogissart had taken advantage of the fact that there was no bridge party tonight to go to bed early, and his wife was reading beside him in bed.

Loursat blew his nose the way old men and peasants did, first unfolding his handkerchief to its full extent, making a trumpet-like sound, three times, five times, then folding the handkerchief just as meticulously.

He was alone in his overheated lair, the door locked as usual – he preferred it that way, though Nicole called it a vice of his.

His grey hair was naturally dishevelled and he made it even more so by running his fingers through it the wrong way. His beard was vaguely cut to a sharp point, and his moustache had turned yellow-brown where he held his cigarette.

There were cigarette ends everywhere, on the floor and in the ashtrays, on the stove and on the bindings of the books.

Loursat smoked for a while, then trudged over to get the bottle that was waiting for him, warming up in the corner of the fireplace.

Cars passed in Rue de Paris, several blocks away, their windscreen wipers moving, rain in the headlights, pallid faces inside.

Loursat did nothing, let his cigarette go out, relit it and spat the butt out, while his hand pulled out a book and opened it at random.

He read a little, sipped at his wine, grunted, and crossed and uncrossed his legs. Books were piled up to the ceiling. There were more in the corridors and in most of the rooms in the house, some that were his, some that had belonged to his father or grandfather.

With no particular aim in mind, he would plant himself next to one of the shelves, then, forgetting perhaps that he was there, smoke a whole cigarette, before grabbing a book and taking it back with him to his desk like a young dog hiding bread crusts under the straw in its kennel ...

This had been going on for twenty years, eighteen to be precise, and in all that time nobody had ever got him to accept a dinner invitation – not his cousins the Rogissarts, who gave a dinner followed by bridge every Friday, not the senior member of the bar association, who had been a good friend of his father's, not his brother-in-law Dossin, who entertained politicians, and not successive prefects, who, when they started out, not knowing the score, would automatically invite him.

He scratched himself, snorted, coughed, blew his nose and spat. He felt hot. His smoking jacket was now covered in fine ash. He read ten pages of a legal treatise, then switched to the middle of a book of seventeenth-century memoirs.

As the hours passed, he would become heavier, his eyes increasingly watery, his gestures almost hieratically slow.

The master bedroom, the room in which for generations the masters of the house had slept and which he himself had occupied with his wife, was in the other wing of the same floor. But he hadn't been in there for a long time. When the bottle was empty, sometimes about midnight, sometimes much later, at one or three in the morning, he would get to his feet, never forgetting to switch off the main light, or to half open the window for fear of the smoke from the stove.

Then he would proceed to a nearby room that had once been his secretary's office, where he had set up an iron bed, and, leaving the door

open, would undress, smoke some more, already lying down, and eventually fall asleep with a noisy sigh.

That evening – it was the second Wednesday of the month, the day of the regular dinner at the Prefecture – Loursat topped up the stove with particular care, because, thanks to the cold outside and the rain on the windowpanes, the heat in the room was becoming ever more voluptuous.

He could hear the raindrops and, occasionally, the squeak of a shutter that hadn't been properly shut; the wind was rising and sudden gusts swept through the streets. He could also hear, with the clarity of a metronome, the ticking of his gold stopwatch in his waistcoat pocket.

He had reread some pages from the journeys of Tamberlaine, a book that smelt of old paper, the binding falling apart. He might have been about to get up and look for something else to browse through when he slowly raised his head, surprised and intrigued.

Usually, apart from the whistles of the goods trains and the distant passing of cars, no noise reached him other than the footsteps of Joséphine the Dwarf, who at ten o'clock – the time never varied – would go upstairs to her room, which was just above the study, and who was in the habit, before going to bed, of walking around the room twenty times in all directions.

But Fine had been in bed for a long time now. The noise that had reached Loursat in his torpor was a new noise, something completely unaccustomed.

He thought at first of the cracking of a whip, the kind he heard in the morning when the dustman drove his horse-drawn cart along the street.

But it hadn't come from the street and it wasn't a whip. The echo of the noise was deeper and longer than that. In actual fact, it was as if something had hit him in the chest. He pricked up his ears, his face expressing annoyance, displeasure and even a feeling that might not have been anxiety but looked a lot like it.

The extraordinary thing about it was the silence *afterwards*. A silence of abnormal density in which it seemed as if shockwaves were uneasily stirring the air.

He didn't stand up immediately. He poured himself a glass of wine and gulped it down, put his cigarette back in his mouth, got warily to his feet, walked to the door and stood listening before opening it.

In the corridor, he turned on the light switch. The three dusty ceiling lamps along the length of the corridor shone down on nothing but solitude and silence.

‘Nicole!’ he said in a low voice.

He was certain now that what he had heard was a gunshot. He kept telling himself it might have come from outside, but didn’t believe it.

He wasn’t in a panic. He walked slowly, his shoulders stooped as always, swaying like a bear – his cousin, Rogissart’s wife, accused him of adopting that gait to intimidate people. And that wasn’t the only thing she said about him!

He reached the top of the white stone staircase with its iron banister and leaned over to look at the hall downstairs. It was empty.

‘Nicole!’

As softly as he spoke, his voice echoed through the house.

He might have been about to turn round and plunge back into the warm peace of his study when he thought he perceived furtive footsteps above his head, even though nobody lived in that part of the second floor, which was full of attic rooms that had been used by the domestic staff in the days when they had a butler, a chauffeur, a gardener and several maids.

Nicole slept at the end of the left wing, and her father advanced along a corridor similar to the one that led to his study, except that one of the three ceiling lights was missing. Stopping outside a door, he had the impression that light was coming out from underneath it and that this light went off abruptly.

‘Nicole,’ he called again.

He knocked at the door. His daughter asked:

‘What is it?’

He could have sworn that the sound didn’t come from the bed, which must be to the left – at least it had been there the last time Loursat had gone into his daughter’s room by chance, perhaps two years earlier.

‘Open up!’ he said simply.

‘Just a minute ...’

The minute was a very long one. Behind the door, someone moved, trying hard to make his or her movements as silent as possible.

At the end of the corridor was a spiral staircase that served the whole house: the backstairs, for the use of tradesmen.

Loursat was still waiting when a step on that staircase creaked. There was no doubt about it. And when he turned, as quickly as he could, he was certain, absolutely certain, that he saw someone pass, a man rather than a woman, he would even have sworn it was a young man in a beige raincoat.

The door opened, and Nicole stood looking at her father with her usual calm, devoid of curiosity or affection, a calm born of perfect indifference.

‘What do you want?’

The ceiling light and the bedside lamp were both on and the bed was in a mess, but its disorder struck Loursat as artificial. As for Nicole, although she had put on a dressing gown, she was still wearing her stockings.

‘Did you hear something?’ he asked, looking again towards the backstairs.

She felt the need to declare:

‘I was asleep.’

‘There’s someone in the house.’

‘Do you think so?’

Nicole’s clothes lay on the rug.

‘I have the impression someone fired a shot.’

He headed for the far end of the corridor. He wasn’t scared. He wasn’t worried. It wouldn’t have taken much for him to shrug and go back to his study. Yet if someone really had fired a shot, if he had seen clearly, if a young man had just crossed the empty space at the end of the corridor, it was best to go and check.

The most surprising thing was that Nicole didn’t follow him immediately. She lingered in the bedroom, and by the time he felt her presence behind him and turned, she had taken off her stockings.

He didn’t care. She could do whatever she wanted. It was only unconsciously that he registered these details.

‘I’m sure a man just went downstairs. As I didn’t hear the door down there, he must be hiding somewhere in the dark.’

‘I wonder what a burglar would be looking for here. Apart from the old books ...’

Nicole was taller than him, quite sturdy, even a little fat, with heavy reddish-blond hair and a redhead’s fawn eyes and fair complexion.

She followed him without enthusiasm and without fear, as sullen as he was.

‘I can’t hear anything now,’ he observed.

He looked at his daughter, thinking she might have had a young man in her room, and once again almost went back to his study.

By chance, he lifted his head towards the stairwell and saw a halo of light.

‘There’s a light on the second floor.’

‘Maybe it’s Fine.’

He threw her a heavy, scornful look. What would Fine be doing at midnight in that wing of the house which was now only used for storage? Not only that: Fine scared so easily that whenever Loursat was away, she demanded to move her bed to Nicole’s room and sleep there!

He climbed slowly, step by step, sure that he was annoying his daughter. It was the first time in years that he had moved out of the narrow circle of his ritual comings and goings.

It was almost an unknown world that he was entering. He sniffed: the more he advanced, the stronger grew the smell of powder.

The second-floor corridor was narrow. An old carpet had been laid there – probably when they had replaced the carpets on the first floor, and that was thirty years ago or more! Shelves ran along the walls, crammed with unbound books, journals and magazines, and odd collections of newspapers.

Nicole was still at her father’s heels, as impassive as ever.

‘As you can see, there’s nobody here!’

She didn’t add:

‘You’ve had too much to drink again!’

But it was clear from her look.

‘All the same, someone put that light on!’ he retorted, pointing to a lighted bulb.

He bent down.

‘And brought in this cigarette that’s still hot!’

The cigarette he picked up had left a burn in the threadbare reddish carpet.

He puffed, having just climbed the stairs, and took a few hesitant steps, still wondering if it might not be better to go back to his study.

His memories of this floor almost all dated from his childhood, when the three rooms on the left were servants’ rooms. The first had been that of Eva, a maid for whom he had long nursed a secret passion until he had caught her one evening with the chauffeur in a pose he had never forgotten.

The room at the end had been that of Eusèbe, the gardener, with whom he would make traps for sparrows.

It struck him now that the door wasn't properly closed. He moved forwards, and this time his daughter stayed behind as he pushed open the door without any curiosity, just to see what had become of Eusèbe's room.

The smell dispelled any lingering doubt, and in addition there was a slight movement, or rather a quiver of life.

He searched for the light switch. He no longer knew on which side it was. The light came on and Loursat found himself looking into two eyes that stared back at him.

He didn't move. He couldn't have. There was something much too extraordinary in his situation, and in those eyes.

They were those of a man lying on a bed. The blanket covered only part of his body. One leg was hanging out, wrapped in a sizeable dressing, perhaps a splint, the kind placed around broken limbs.

All this, he barely saw. What mattered were that stranger's eyes staring at him, in his house, under his roof, eyes filled with a vast questioning.

The body was a man's, as were the face and the thick crew-cut hair, but the eyes were a child's eyes, big, frightened eyes that seemed to Loursat to be on the verge of tears.

The nose quivered and the lips moved to form a pout, the kind made by someone who is trying to cry out or weep.

A noise ... A human noise ... A kind of gurgling, a wail, like a baby's first cry ...

Then immediately afterwards, a subsidence, a stillness so sudden that for a moment Loursat stopped breathing.

When he recovered, he ran his hand through his hair and said in a voice that sounded to him like someone else's:

'I think he's dead ...'

He turned to Nicole, who was waiting a bit further along the corridor, barefoot in her sky-blue cloth slippers. He repeated:

'I think he's dead ...'

Then, anxiously:

'Who is he?'

He wasn't drunk. He was never drunk. As the day wore on, his gait grew heavier, and so did his head, especially his head, his thoughts became only weakly connected one to another, and he sometimes said words in a low

voice, words that nobody could understand and which were the only apparent indicators of his inner life.

Nicole was looking at him in a kind of stupor, as if the extraordinary thing that evening wasn't the gunshot, the light being on, this man dying behind a door, but Loursat himself, still so calm and ponderous.

The box-office lady at the cinema at last closed the glass cage that was such agony to her all winter in spite of the hot water bottles she brought with her. The loving couples hesitated a moment in the light before plunging into the wet darkness. Soon, doors would open and close again in different parts of town, and voices echo in the streets:

‘See you tomorrow.’

‘Good night.’

At the Prefecture, they were passing around the orangeades, which was a signal that the end was near.

‘Hello? Rogissart?’

The prosecutor, standing in his nightshirt – he'd never got used to pyjamas – frowned and looked at his wife, who raised her eyes from her book.

‘What did you say? ... What?’

Loursat had got back to his study. Nicole, still in her dressing gown, was standing by the door. Fine the Dwarf hadn't given any sign of life: if she was awake, she must be deep inside her bed, petrified with fear, listening to the noises of the house.

Having hung up, Loursat felt like pouring himself a drink, but the bottle was empty. He had exhausted his provision for the day. He was going to have to go down to the cellar, where they had never made up their minds to install electric light.

‘I think you'll be questioned,’ he said to his daughter. ‘You ought to think it over. Maybe you could get dressed?’

She was looking at him harshly. That didn't matter: they didn't love each other, and it had long been agreed that they ignore each other outside mealtimes. It was only out of habit, because it was the done thing, that they even had their meals together, and they never spoke when they did.

‘If you know this man, it may be wiser to admit it straight away. As for the one I saw passing ...’

She repeated what she had already stated:

‘I don’t know anything.’

‘It’s up to you. Fine will be questioned, and presumably also that girl you fired.’

Even though he wasn’t looking at her, he had the impression this scared her.

‘They’ll be here soon,’ he concluded, standing up and walking to the door.

It was all going to take a long time! Rogissart wouldn’t come alone, he would alert his court clerk, the local chief inspector, the Flying Squad. There were spirits and liqueurs in a cupboard in the smoking room, but Loursat never drank any of them, and he searched for a candle so that he could go down to the cellar. He found one in the kitchen, where he had to grope about: he was like a stranger in his own house, knowing only his own small part of it.

In this kitchen, in the old days, when Eva was around ...

He took a bottle from the usual pigeonhole, climbed back up, breathing hard, stopped on the ground floor and out of curiosity went and examined the tradesman’s entrance, which led out into Impasse des Tanneurs.

The door wasn’t locked. He opened it and was unpleasantly surprised by the cold and the smell of dustbins. He closed the door again and went back to his study.

Nicole was no longer there. She must have gone to get dressed. He heard a noise in the street, half opened a shutter and spotted a policeman on a bicycle waiting by the kerb, presumably alerted by Rogissart.

He carefully broke the wax and as he uncorked the bottle, he thought of the man upstairs, the dead man, who had been shot in the chest, almost at point-blank range, shot by someone who couldn’t have been acting in cold blood, because instead of hitting the heart, the bullet had entered too high up, almost in the neck. That was probably why, instead of crying out, the wounded man had only been able to emit a kind of gurgle. He had bled to death, one leg outside the bed.

He was a giant, all the more imposing for lying there motionless. Standing up, he would surely have been a whole head taller than Loursat. His features were hard, like those of a sturdy countryman or an unthinking brute.

Loursat would have been quite surprised if he had heard himself say, after drinking half a glass of Burgundy:

‘It’s funny!’

There was a noise above him. The Dwarf was moving around in her bed, but she wouldn’t get up unless she was forced to.

At the Hôtel de Paris, three travellers were playing *belote* with the owner, who glanced at the time every now and again. The brasseries were closing. The caretaker of the Prefecture was also closing the heavy doors, and the last car was driving away.

The rain was coming down even more heavily now, falling slantwise because of the wind from the northwest. Quite a storm must be blowing up out at sea.

His elbows on his desk, Loursat scratched his head, allowing ash to fall on the lapel of his jacket, then let his eyes wander around the room, those big, watery eyes of his, sighed, breathed rather, and murmured:

‘They’re going to be really upset!’

‘They’ meant everyone, starting with Rogissart, or rather Laurence, his wife, who was the more concerned of the two with questions of right and wrong, what people did and what they ought to have done; then the others, everyone at the courthouse, for example, who never knew how to behave on the rare occasions Loursat decided to take on a case, the magistrates, his fellow lawyers, and also people like Dossin, his brother-in-law, the threshing-machine manufacturer Dossin, who rubbed shoulders with politicians and was starting to hanker after a seat as departmental councillor; his wife, Marthe, who was always ill, always complaining, always dressed in diaphanous fabrics, and yet was Loursat’s sister, even though they hadn’t seen each other for years; the street, the respectable people, those who had money and those who pretended, the shopkeepers and hoteliers, the people in the tourist office, the people in the social club, the people in the upper and the lower town.

An investigation would have to be launched!

Because a stranger, in one of the beds in this house ...

When it came down to it, he, Loursat, was related to all of them, all the people who mattered through blood or marriage, he was the grandson of the former mayor who had a street named after him and his bust in a park!

He finished his drink and poured himself another one, but didn’t have time to drink it, because just then there was a sound of cars in the street, at

least two of them. Fine was still in bed, and Nicole hadn't come back, so he had to pad downstairs and search for the bolts of the front door, which he wasn't used to opening, while outside car doors slammed.

It was eleven when he opened his eyes, but he didn't know that yet, because he didn't bother to reach out to his waistcoat and get his watch out. The shutters were closed, leaving a cellar-like half-light in the room, but there were two small, very deep holes in these shutters.

It was these shining eyes that Loursat always looked at with enormous gravity, with the same kind of gravity that children bring to pointless things, because they helped him to guess what the weather was like outside. Although he wasn't totally superstitious, Loursat did create little beliefs for his own personal use: for example, that the days when he had guessed right were good days.

Today he decided: sun! Then he turned heavily and reached for the button that set off a bell in the Dwarf's sepulchral kitchen. The Dwarf was there, serving a glass of wine to a uniformed policeman casually sitting at the table. The policeman asked:

'What's that?'

She replied, in an indifferent tone:

'It's nothing.'

His eyes open, Loursat waited, listening to the noises of the house, which were too distant and too vague to have specific meanings. He rang again.

The policeman looked at Fine, who shrugged.

'If only he'd die!'

She took a coffee pot from the corner of the fireplace, shook it, poured some coffee into another pot and grabbed a sugar bowl, covered in flies, from the table. Once upstairs, she didn't bother to knock, or to say good morning. She put the tray down on a chair that served as a night table, walked over to the window and opened the shutters.

Loursat thought he had lost. The sky was blue-green, the colour of mercury. A moment later it cleared, then darkened again, rain clouds crossing the icy air.

‘Who’s downstairs?’

This was a not very pleasant hour to be got through every morning, but he was used to it, and had formulas of his own to make it less painful. He mustn’t move too soon, because his head was too empty and his stomach easily turned. The Dwarf had time to light the fire, her gestures so abrupt that she gave the impression she resented the objects.

‘There’s lots of people downstairs and upstairs!’ she replied, throwing his shirt on the bed.

‘What about Mademoiselle?’

‘She’s been shut up in the big drawing room for an hour with one of those men.’

The Dwarf’s moods had long stopped being funny: they’d had too many years to get used to them. Nicole was two when Fine had taken charge of her in a way, and since then the woman had hated the rest of the world and Loursat in particular.

Loursat didn’t care. As a rule, he didn’t see anything that happened in the house. Sometimes, though, he would unwittingly open a door and find the Dwarf on her knees, warming Nicole’s bare feet in her hands or against her empty breasts.

Which didn’t stop her from occasionally giving Nicole the cold shoulder for some mysterious reason, sometimes for weeks on end!

A few minutes after the coffee came the turn of the bottle of mineral water. Loursat drank all of it, gargling. Only after that could he get up. But he would be under the weather until an hour later, once he’d had two or three glasses of wine.

‘Has the prosecutor come too?’

‘I don’t know him!’

He seldom used the bathroom, which was in the other wing, adjacent to the bedroom. A basin in a cupboard, a glass for the toothbrush and a comb were enough for him. He would get dressed in front of Fine as she crouched by the stove, which she had never been able to light at the first attempt.

‘How is Mademoiselle?’

To which Fine replied obstinately, seeming as always to bite with her rodent-like teeth:

‘How should she be?’

It was odd, the way it had happened the night before. Rogissart, who was very tall and very thin, like his wife – people called them the two breadsticks! – had assumed a preoccupied air as he shook his cousin's hand and asked him, with a frown:

‘What was all this you told me over the phone?’

He wouldn't have been particularly surprised if Loursat had burst out laughing and cried:

‘So you fell for it!’

But no, there really was a body in a bed, and it was almost as if Loursat was quite proud, quite happy to show it off.

‘There!’ he declared. ‘I don't know who he is, or how he got here, or what happened to him. That's up to you now, isn't it?’

The court clerk kept coughing: so interminable were his coughing fits, it was hard not to be impatient with him, and eventually angry. There was a chief inspector from the Flying Squad whose name was Binet or Liset, a short man with fish eyes and sparse hair, who had the habit of apologizing at every opportunity. Without meaning to, he was always getting in people's way, he and his chocolate-coloured ratine overcoat, and it became exasperating.

‘Is Nicole at home?’ Rogissart had asked, looking more put out than he'd ever been in his life.

‘She's getting dressed. She'll join us soon.’

‘Does she know?’

‘She was with me when I opened this door.’

Obviously, Loursat had drunk a lot, rather more than usual, and was lisping slightly. It was embarrassing in front of the court clerk and the chief inspector, as well as the deputy prosecutor, who had just arrived, and the head of the local police.

‘Does anyone in the house know this man?’

Nicole carried her entrance off well. It was surprising to see her behaving like a society lady. She seemed to be entering a drawing room where guests were waiting for her. She held out her hand to the prosecutor.

‘Good evening, cousin.’

Then she turned to the others, as if waiting for them to be introduced.

‘Gentlemen ...’

It was a revelation: she had never been like this before.

‘Shall we leave the room,’ Rogissart said, upset at the sight of the corpse with his open eyes, ‘to give you a chance to have a proper look at it?’

They had adjourned to the dining room – the ground-floor drawing room hadn’t been used for years.

‘Loursat, do you mind if I question Nicole?’

‘Go ahead. If you need me, I’ll be in my study.’

Half an hour later, Rogissart had come and joined him, on his own.

‘She claims she knows nothing. This is a very bothersome business, Loursat. I’ve given orders for the body to be taken to the morgue. I don’t want to start the investigation in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to leave a man in the house.’

Loursat didn’t see any harm in that! His eyes were vaguer than ever, and the bottle on the desk was empty.

‘You really haven’t the faintest idea who he could be?’

‘None whatever!’

The tone in which he said this sounded almost like a threat. Either that, or he was making fun of his cousin.

What made the situation all the more delicate was that, even though he had become a drunkard and a recluse, he was still part of society.

True, he didn’t attend any social gatherings, but he hadn’t quarrelled with anyone and people shook his hand when they met him in the street or at the courthouse.

He drank, but he did so privately, all by himself. He was still respectable.

They had nothing to blame him for. On the contrary, they were forced to display a certain pity, to whisper:

‘What a shame! A man who was probably the most gifted in town!’

Which was true, as they realized on the rare occasions he agreed to take on a case.

They hadn’t noticed anything at first when suddenly, eighteen years earlier, a few days before Christmas, his wife had walked out, leaving him with a two-year-old baby. They had even smiled, despite themselves. For weeks, they had come up against a closed door. People like Rogissart, more or less related to Loursat, had lectured him.

‘You mustn’t let yourself go, old man. You can’t live like this, cut off from everyone, like a sick animal.’

But he *could* live like this – he’d been doing it for eighteen years! Eighteen years during which he hadn’t needed anyone, no friends, no

mistresses, not even any servants – Fine, whom he had hired, mainly took care of Nicole.

He didn't bother with Nicole. He ignored her, quite deliberately. He didn't hate her – she wasn't responsible – but he did suspect her, having cross-checked, of being the daughter of the other man, an aide to the then prefect.

This undramatic drama had made an impression on everyone. Precisely because it was more unexpected, because there hadn't been a breath of scandal, and they hadn't heard anything subsequently.

Her name was Geneviève. She belonged to one of the ten best families in town. She was pretty and frail. When she had married Loursat, everyone was convinced it was a love match.

For three years, there hadn't been a bit of gossip, not a single malicious rumour. And all of a sudden she had run off with Bernard, without saying a word, and it came out that she had been his mistress for a long time, perhaps since the start of the marriage, some claimed even before.

Nobody had heard a thing about them since then, except for Geneviève's parents, who had received a postcard from Egypt, with nothing but a signature.

His mouth furred, he walked along the corridor as far as the top of the stairs. From there he could see two men with hats on their heads, sitting downstairs on the first steps. He looked at them for a moment, with that look he had assumed over the years, a vague, heavy look, hard to interpret and painful to bear, then went up to the second floor, from where a lot of noise was coming.

Walking backwards, Chief Inspector Binet bumped into him, gave a start and stammered profuse apologies. Other men were with him, three of them, including a photographer equipped with a huge camera. They were at work in their own sweet way, with pipes or cigarettes in their mouths, measuring, rummaging, lugging the furniture about in the room where the body had been found.

'Isn't Prosecutor Rogissart with you?' Loursat asked after observing the scene.

'I don't think he's meant to be coming. The examining magistrate is downstairs.'

'Who's been appointed?'

‘Monsieur Ducup. I think he’s proceeding with the interrogations. I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’ Loursat asked calmly.

‘For ... for all this mess ...’

Loursat was already walking away with a shrug. It was time to go down to the cellar and stock up on wine.

The house was cold this morning, full of unaccustomed draughts and unusual noises. You met people you didn’t know going up and down the stairs. Occasionally the bell rang, and a police officer went and opened the door.

Along the street, the neighbours’ servants must be spending their time in the doorways or at the windows. Loursat climbed back up from the cellar, breathing heavily and clutching his three bottles, and kept straight ahead, heedless of all the police activity.

He was just passing the large drawing room when the door opened.

Nicole appeared, very tall and very upright, with an exaggerated impassivity, and instinctively stopped when she saw her father. Behind her loomed the figure of Ducup, dressed to the nines, curly-haired, with his weaselly face and that ironic smile he had adopted once and for all and which he thought gave him a categorical expression.

Loursat was holding a bottle in one hand and two in the other and he wasn’t embarrassed by it, despite the insistent look Ducup gave him. Nicole was also looking at the bottles, but instead of saying anything, as she’d had a vague desire to do, she sighed and walked away.

‘My dear maître ...’ Ducup began.

He was thirty. He’d had strings pulled for him. He always would, because he did what was required of him. He had married a woman who squinted but who, through that marriage, connected him to the families in positions of power in the town.

‘They told me you were asleep, so I didn’t think it was right to disturb you.’

Loursat walked into the drawing room and put his bottles down on the table, a table they must have fetched from somewhere else, because it wasn’t usually there. The room was vast and bare. The waxed parquet floor was covered in dust, and there were gilded seats lined up along the walls, as if for a ball. Only the shutters on one of the four windows had been opened and, as there was no fire, Ducup had kept on his guardsman’s coat. A court

clerk sitting in front of his paperwork stood up when Loursat appeared. With each step, the chandelier tinkled, a huge chandelier with crystal drops that vibrated musically at the slightest quiver in the air.

‘On the advice of Prosecutor Rogissart, I started by questioning your daughter.’

No, Loursat definitely had no desire to stay here, in this excessively vast, cold, grey room. Seeing him looking around, you had the impression he was searching for a corner in which to settle down, or perhaps for a glass for his wine.

‘Come to my study!’ he grunted, picking up his bottles again.

The court clerk wondered if he should follow. Ducup also wasn’t sure what to tell him. It was Loursat who said:

‘You’ll be called when you’re needed!’

He hadn’t yet lit the cigarette he’d had between his lips since morning and which was starting to crumble. He climbed the stairs, with Ducup following. He kicked the study door shut behind them, and now that he was in his lair he at last became himself again. He sniffed and snorted, blew his nose, took a glass from the cupboard, poured himself a drink, looked at Ducup and said, with the bottle in his hand:

‘How about it?’

‘I never drink at this hour, thank you ... I’ve just had a long interview with your daughter, an interview that lasted nearly two hours. I was finally able to convince her that she would be wrong not to speak out.’

After going round in circles like a boar in his wallow, Loursat at last found the right position in his worn leather armchair, from which he only had to reach out his hand to poke the stove or pour himself a drink.

‘I don’t need to tell you, my dear maître, that when, this morning, the prosecutor gave me the somewhat daunting honour of ...’

It was difficult with Loursat, because he wasn’t listening, just looking, and what his look said was:

‘Stupid idiot!’

‘It was only when he insisted that I agreed and—’

‘Cigarette?’

‘No, thank you! ... It struck me as obvious that someone in the house must know where this man came from. Starting with that idea, all I had to do was choose between—’

‘Look, Ducup, why don’t you come straight out and tell me what my daughter told you?’

‘I was coming to that! I admit she took some convincing, but, having understood that she was acting on noble impulses, in this case the desire not to betray certain friendships—’

‘You’re boring me, Ducup!’

He didn’t say ‘boring’, but a coarser word, and sank further into his armchair, beginning to be suffused with the combined warmth of the wine and the stove.

‘You may now comprehend why I was so embarrassed earlier. We’re all of us happy to believe in appearances, in the superficial realities that surround us, and we find it hard to imagine that beneath these reassuring surfaces, there exists a subterranean life that—’

Loursat blew his nose loudly, cynically, just to get it over with. Offended, Ducup stiffened.

‘As you wish! The fact of the matter is that, some evenings, Mademoiselle Nicole goes out with friends, and other evenings they come here.’

He waited for the effect of this revelation, but Loursat didn’t flinch. On the contrary, he seemed rather delighted by what he was hearing.

‘To her room?’ he asked.

‘There’s a room on the second floor, apparently, a kind of storeroom, that they’ve dubbed the Chaos Bar.’

The telephone rang. Loursat did as the Dwarf had done that morning: he didn’t reply for a long time and only made up his mind when the ringing became far too insistent.

‘What is it? ... Oh, it’s you, Rogissart ... Yes, he’s in my study right now ... No, I don’t know anything yet, he was just starting to ... All right, I’ll put him on.’

Trembling, Ducup grabbed the receiver.

‘... Yes, prosecutor ... Of course, prosecutor ... You want me to ... All right, prosecutor ...’

A look at Loursat.

‘Yes, he’s here ... I’m sorry? ... Of course, prosecutor ... I was just telling him about a group of young people who are in the habit of getting together, sometimes in town, in a bar near the market, sometimes right here ... Yes, in a room on the second floor ... No, not that one, another one

nearby. Two weeks ago, a newcomer was introduced to the group. As a game, they got him drunk. After which, to put him to the test, they challenged him to steal a car and drive the whole group to a country inn located about ten kilometres out of town ... Yes, of course I've made a note of the names ... That's right! I thought of it straight away. It was the deputy mayor's car, the one that was found one morning with one wing damaged and blood on the ... What? ... I beg your pardon, prosecutor. I'll just fetch the paper where I noted them down ...'

What impulse other than that of annoying him could Loursat be acting on in walking round and round the room? The more impatiently, even imploringly Ducup looked at him, the more he wandered about, breathing heavily as he did so.

'Here we are, prosecutor ... First there's Edmond Dossin ... Yes, Charles Dossin's son ... I don't know exactly. It's hard to work out what role they each played ... Then there's Jules Daillat, the son of the pork butcher in Rue d'Allier ... That's right! I intend to get back to that. I've simply noted down the names ... There's a bank clerk. His father's a cashier at the Crédit du Centre, and the son works in the same bank. Destrivaux's the name ... Yes, prosecutor ... Then there's someone named Luska, and finally the newcomer, Émile Manu. His mother's a widow who gives piano lessons ... On the way back from the country inn, Manu was in a very excitable state. They all saw something on the road, a tall figure holding his arms out. There was a thud, and the young people stopped the car, got out and found an injured man ... Yes, prosecutor, Mademoiselle Nicole was with them. They must have been in a terrible fright. Apparently, this individual threatened them, and Nicole suggested taking him to her house ... That's right, unbeknown to Monsieur Loursat ... No, the cook was informed the next day ... Yes, of course, I'll question her later ... It was Edmond Dossin who went to fetch Dr Matray. The man had a broken leg, with a tear in the skin ten centimetres long ... Yes, he's still here ...'

Obviously, they were referring to Loursat, who at that moment was calmly pouring himself a drink!

'What's that? ... I'm sorry, there was a noise next to me ... I asked her. They've met several times since, yes ... She claims the injured man was unbearable and made all kinds of demands.'

Loursat smiled as if it had amused him to learn that for two weeks an injured man had lived under his roof, unbeknown to him, not to mention the

visits of Dr Matray (they had been at school together) and the get-togethers of these young people, at least one of whom he knew: Dossin, the son of his sister, the pain in the neck, as he thought of her.

‘Obviously, yes ... Yes, I see what you mean. That’s the point I myself insisted on ... I got the impression she was being perfectly honest. She admitted that Émile Manu came to see her yesterday evening ... Yes, the son of the widow who gives piano lessons. In fact, she gives Mademoiselle Nicole lessons too ... Hello? I didn’t quite catch that ... They went upstairs together to see the injured man. Then Mademoiselle Nicole took him to her room.’

An anxious glance at Loursat, who didn’t seem the least bit upset! On the contrary, it was as if he was gloating!

‘Definitely! I was surprised too ... It’s possible. I did think of that. I read this book. There are examples of young women who falsely accuse themselves. But the thing is, she’s quite positive. Anyway, Manu left her at about twenty to twelve. She didn’t see him out.’

What observation did the prosecutor make at the other end? Ducup couldn’t help smiling.

‘It’s true, people just walked in and out. Apparently, the little door that leads to a side alley was never locked ... She heard the gunshot soon after Émile Manu left her. She wasn’t sure whether or not to leave her room. She was just about to make up her mind when her father appeared in the corridor ... Yes, it’s all going to take a lot of checking ... All right, I’ll tell him ... Goodbye, prosecutor.’

Feeling that he had taken a degree of revenge, Ducup hung up and turned to Loursat.

‘The prosecutor asked me to tell you that he’s very upset about all this and will do everything he possibly can to keep Mademoiselle Nicole’s name out of the newspapers. You heard what I told him, so I don’t think there’s much to add. I agree with the prosecutor: this is an extremely delicate and extremely unpleasant case for everyone.’

‘Would you mind spelling all those names for me and giving me their addresses?’

‘I don’t have all of them. For some, like Manu, your daughter wasn’t very sure ... It just remains for me to ask you, on behalf of the prosecutor, to be so kind as to submit to an official interrogation. It is in your house that —’

Loursat, who had already opened the door, yelled into the corridor:

‘Get the court clerk up here! ... Hey, someone down there! Get Monsieur Ducup’s court clerk up here!’

Rogissart must by now be telephoning the doleful Madame Dossin, who always dressed in pale clothes, mostly mauve, and dragged herself elegantly from one divan to another, her only real effort being to arrange flowers in vases with her slender fingers.

She was as unlike Loursat as it was possible to be. She was the refined element of the family! She had married Dossin, who affected the same elegance, and they had built the most sumptuous villa in Moulins, one of the few in which service was provided by a white-gloved butler.

‘Hello? Is that you, dear friend? How are you? ... I’m sorry, but I have to inform you that your son ... Oh, of course, we’ll do everything we can ...’

Loursat could almost hear the telephone call and see his sister, surrounded by cushions and flowers, fall into a panic, call for a maid and treat herself to a complete swoon.

‘You called me, sir?’

‘Please take down Monsieur Loursat’s statement.’

‘Hector Dominique François Loursat de Saint-Marc,’ Loursat recited with fierce irony. ‘Lawyer at the Moulins bar. Forty-eight years old. Husband of Geneviève Loursat, née Grosillière, who walked out without leaving an address.’

The court clerk raised his head and looked at his boss, wondering if he should transcribe these last words.

‘Write this: “I have no idea what Mademoiselle Nicole Loursat did or may have done. I have no idea what happened in the rooms of my house that I do not occupy, and in any case it is no concern of mine. Having thought I heard a gunshot on Wednesday night, I made the mistake of taking an interest in the matter, and discovered a man I do not know, lying dead of a bullet wound in a bed on the second floor. I have nothing else to say.”’

He turned to Ducup, who was crossing and uncrossing his legs.

‘Cigarette?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘Burgundy?’

‘I already told you.’

‘That you never drink at this hour. Too bad! Now ...’

He waited, clearly indicating that he wanted to be alone in his study.

‘I must also ask your permission to question your servant. As for the maid who was dismissed yesterday evening, she is already being sought. You should understand better than anyone—’

‘Than anyone, yes!’

‘The dead man’s photograph and prints have been sent to Paris, thanks to Chief Inspector Binet.’

At which Loursat grunted for no reason, as if humming a refrain:

‘Poor Binet!’

‘He’s a valued public servant who—’

‘Oh yes, much valued!’

He hadn’t even finished his first bottle. On the other hand, that morning’s foul mood had gone, as had the bad taste in his mouth and the feeling of emptiness in his head.

‘It’s possible I may need to—’

‘Do whatever you have to do!’

‘But ...’

To hell with Ducup! Loursat had had enough and opened the door.

‘You must see that I’ve done all I can to—’

‘Yes, Monsieur Ducup.’

In his mouth, the name sounded like an insult.

‘As for the reporters—’

‘You’ll sort that out, won’t you?’

Just get out and do it, for heaven’s sake! Impossible to think clearly with a face like Ducup’s in front of one’s eyes! He’d even managed to fill the study with the reek of his scent or his brilliantine!

So, Nicole ...

He shook hands with Ducup, and even with the court clerk, just to get it over with, and locked the door behind them.

Nicole ...

He went to stoke the stove, and the flames almost licked his legs.

Nicole ...

He walked twice round the study, poured himself a full glass of wine, knocked it back standing up, then sat down and stared at the piece of paper on which he had scribbled the names Ducup had mentioned.

Nicole ...

And he’d taken her for a big, gawky, obtuse girl!

A car drove away: probably Ducup. People were wandering all over the house.

What could Nicole possibly be doing?

He didn't laugh. It wasn't even a smile but a moment's surprise immediately followed by a feeling of joy, a glee as all-enveloping as a warm bath.

It was almost one o'clock. Loursat had walked into the dining room to find the Dwarf angrily laying the table. Without quite knowing quite why, he stood with his back to the fireplace, in which the coal was sending up smoke.

Fine, after two or three impatient gestures like those one makes towards a stubborn fly, said as she searched in the silverware drawer:

'I didn't think I'd rung!'

He looked at her in surprise, and was quite amazed to see how small, ugly and nasty she was. He almost wondered what she was doing in his house. He also observed that the silverware drawer was the one where the table napkins had been kept in the old days, and it struck him that he had never noticed the change.

On other days, he would wait for the bell that announced meals just as it had in the days when the house had been truly lived in. Once the bell had been rung, he would sometimes linger another quarter of an hour or more in his study, then, suddenly realizing, proceed to the dining room, where he would find Nicole reading while waiting for him.

Without saying a word, she would close her book and glance at the maid, who would then start to serve.

Today he had arrived before Nicole. For a moment, he wondered why the Dwarf had emerged from the depths of her kitchen and was laying the table. Then he remembered that the other servant had been fired.

It was curious! He wouldn't have been able to say what was curious. He had a vague impression of novelty. Here he was, in his own home, in the house where he had been born and which he had never stopped living in,

and he was suddenly astonished that a huge monastery bell should be set in motion to announce to two people that a meal was served.

Fine went out without looking at him. She hated him with all her might and had no qualms about saying to Nicole:

‘Your filthy beast of a father ...’

The bell rang. Nicole came in, calm, almost serene, in no way looking like a young woman who has just been questioned for two hours by an examining magistrate. She hadn’t wept. For the first time, Loursat noticed a surprising detail: his daughter was concerned with matters pertaining to the house! It wasn’t much: on coming in, she glanced at every detail of the table, an automatic glance such as the mistress of the house might give. Then she opened the hatch of the dumb waiter, leaned in and said in a low voice:

‘Send it up, Fine.’

She had thought of that! She was standing in for the maid, bringing the dishes to the table before sitting down. All this without a glance at her father, without a word about what had happened and no curiosity about his reactions.

However hard he tried, eating as messily as usual, drinking his Burgundy, chewing noisily, he couldn’t help coming back to Nicole, whom he didn’t dare examine openly, only in furtive little glances.

Unusually, he would have liked to talk to her, to say just anything, to hear her voice and his own in this room where the only sounds were the clatter of the forks and occasionally the sputtering of a lump of coal.

‘Next one, Fine!’ she called down the dumb waiter.

She was on the plump side, and yet she didn’t give an impression of flabbiness. That was what surprised Loursat the most. In Nicole’s heaviness and placidity, there was a kind of slumbering strength.

And now, reluctantly, he took from his pocket, along with strands of tobacco, the crumpled piece of paper on which he had written the names and said:

‘What does this Émile Manu do?’

He was embarrassed at having spoken, at having broken with a tradition that had lasted so many years. It wouldn’t have taken much for him to blush at this disloyalty to his own character.

Nicole turned to face him. Her eyes were large, her forehead smooth. She looked down at the tablecloth, and at the paper. Understanding, she replied:

‘He’s an assistant at the Georges bookshop.’

A real conversation almost ensued. Perhaps if she had said only a few pointless words, some words more than those strictly necessary to her answer ...

But it stopped there. To save face, Loursat stared at the piece of paper, which still lay on the tablecloth, and chewed even more noisily.

It was his habit to go out for a walk at about three in the afternoon, the way people walk their dogs, and it was as if he kept himself on a leash, never going beyond the same blocks.

This time, as soon as he left home, he broke with the rule: he stopped, turned and stood there at the kerb, gazing up at his own house.

It wasn’t possible to explain what he was feeling or if he was pleased or not. It was extraordinary, that was it! He was seeing his house! He was seeing it again like when he was a child or a young man, coming back to it like when he returned on vacation in the days when he was studying law in Paris.

It wasn’t that he felt emotional. He wouldn’t have allowed himself to feel emotional for anything in the world. He liked playing the grouch.

But wasn’t it strange to think that ... After all, on those famous evenings, *they* must have had the light on! And from the outside, that light must have filtered through the slats of the shutters.

That door leading to the alley remained open all night! Hadn’t his neighbours ever glimpsed shadowy figures slipping in and out?

And Nicole, in her room, with that ...

He had to consult the piece of paper: *Manu! Émile Manu!* A name that went well with the beige raincoat and the figure he had glimpsed at the end of the corridor.

And then, when the two of them were in Nicole’s room, did they ...?

He shook his head as he walked, his shoulders stooped, his hands behind his back. Suddenly he stopped. A little girl stood there, looking at him.

She must be a neighbour’s child. In the old days he had known the inhabitants of all the houses, but inevitably, there had been moves and deaths. Births too! So whose child was this? What was she thinking as she gazed at him? Why did she look scared?

Perhaps her parents had told her he was a bogeyman, or an ogre.

A moment later, he caught himself murmuring:

‘It’s true, she takes piano lessons!’

He had come back to Nicole. He had heard her playing, on rare occasions, and it had been rather painful. But he had never realized that Nicole was actually studying the piano. He had never wondered why, or if she loved music, or how she had chosen her teacher. He had occasionally passed a grey-haired woman on the stairs or in the corridors who had nodded hello.

It was curious! What was even more curious was that he had reached Rue d’Allier, which was outside his circuit, and had stopped outside the window of the Georges bookshop, a sad, drab, old-fashioned window, so badly lit in the evening that from a distance you might assume the shop was closed.

He went in and recognized old Georges, who had always looked old, a surly man wearing a police cap, with a walrus moustache and thick eyebrows like Clemenceau’s.

He sat writing at a high desk and didn’t look up. At the far end of the long, narrow shop, in the part lit from morning to evening by an electric bulb, where the books for the reading room, bound in black canvas, were kept, a young man was climbing down a ladder.

At first, he came forwards quite naturally. He was a nondescript young man, such as you might see in any bookshop or any kind of shop, not completely formed, his neck long, his hair rather blond, his features indistinct.

Suddenly he stopped, presumably recognizing Loursat. Perhaps Loursat had been pointed out to him in the street. Or perhaps he had seen him in his house. After all ...

Quite pale, tense from head to foot, he glanced around as if searching for help.

Loursat caught himself playing the game, fiercely rolling his eyes!

‘What ... what are you ...’

He couldn’t speak! He had a lump in his throat! You could see his Adam’s apple going up and down above his innocent blue tie.

Old Georges looked up in surprise.

‘Give me a book, young man!’

‘Which book, monsieur?’

‘Any book. Whatever you like.’

‘Show Monsieur the latest titles!’ Georges cut in.

The boy rushed to catch – just in time – a pile of books that was on the verge of falling. He was really young – not yet nineteen, maybe only seventeen! As thin as a chicken that's shot up too quickly! Or rather, a young rooster that's starting to take itself seriously!

It was he who'd been driving the car and had ...

Loursat grunted into his beard, angry at himself for thinking about all that, even for taking an interest in it. He had held out for nearly twenty years, and now, because of this stupid business ...

'That's enough! Give me that one! No need to wrap it!'

He had spoken in a harsh, curt tone.

'How much is it?'

'Eighteen francs, monsieur. I'll give you a cover.'

'There's no need!'

He left at last, stuffing the book in his pocket. He felt like a drink. He could barely recognize Rue d'Allier even though it was the main thoroughfare of Moulins. For example, next to the gunsmith's, which hadn't changed, he discovered a huge, overlit Prisunic store, its goods displayed out on the pavement: cheeses cheek by jowl with woollens and phonograph records.

Further along the street, above a pork butcher's with three marble windows, he read a sign saying: *Daillat, Fine Delicatessen*.

The Daillat who also came to his house, along with Dossin and the group!

Was he one of the people you could see moving about inside the shop?

Fresh-faced shopgirls dressed in white, coming and going at a crazy speed ... A man in a thin-striped jacket and a white apron ... No, that one, who was ruddy-faced and had no neck, was at least forty ... Perhaps the red-headed young man slicing cutlets, who was dressed the same way?

The shop was thriving – enough to make you wonder how a small town could devour so much cooked meat!

What was the name of the bar he'd been told these young people frequented? He hadn't made a note of it. He remembered it was near the market, and he plunged into that dark neighbourhood, with its narrow streets.

The Boxing Bar! That was it! A not very wide window with small panes and a rustic-style curtain drawn across it. A very small room, two dark tables and a few chairs next to a high counter.

It was empty. Loursat advanced like a bear, grumpy and mistrustful, looking at the photographs of performers and boxers stuck to the mirrors, the excessively high stools, the cocktail equipment.

A man finally emerged from behind the counter as if springing from a hatch, which was more or less the case, because he'd had to stoop and come through a kind of hole from the next room.

He wore a white jacket and was eating something. He looked at Loursat, frowned, grabbed a napkin and grunted:

‘What’ll it be?’

Did he know Loursat? Was he in the know about the whole thing? Yes, he must be.

What was certain too was that he was a disreputable character, with his broken nose and flattened forehead: a former wrestler or fairground boxer.

‘Do you have any red wine?’

Still chewing his food, the man held a bottle up to the light to see if there was enough wine left in it and finally poured it into a glass in an uninterested manner.

The wine tasted of cork. Loursat didn’t speak, didn’t ask any questions. He left and walked back through the dark neighbourhood more quickly than before. By the time he reached home, he was in a bad mood.

He must have climbed the stairs, because he found himself on the first floor without realizing it. He ploughed on, turning the timer switches to light his way. Feeling something heavy in his pocket, he realized it was his book.

‘Idiot!’ he muttered.

He was in a hurry to get back to his lair, to close the padded door behind him and ...

In the doorway of the study, he frowned and asked:

‘What are you doing here?’

Poor Chief Inspector Binet! He hadn’t expected such a greeting. He stood up, then sat down again, apologizing. It was Joséphine who had admitted him to the study while it was still light. She had left him to his fate, and he had stayed seated with his hat on his knees, first in the half-light, then in complete darkness.

‘I thought I ought perhaps to bring you up to date on ... I mean, it did happen in your house, didn’t it?’

Loursat took back possession of his stove, his Burgundy, his cigarettes, perhaps his smell.

‘So, what have you found? ... Would you like some?’

‘With pleasure.’

This was a mistake – Loursat had only offered him some of his wine out of politeness, and now he couldn’t find a second glass.

‘I’m really not that bothered,’ Binet declared. ‘Please don’t go to any trouble.’

But now it was a personal matter for Loursat, who stubbornly searched for a glass, even going all the way to the dining room. He found one at last, brought it back and filled it in an almost threatening manner.

‘Go ahead, drink! Now, what were you saying?’

‘That I wanted to keep you up to date. You may be of some help to us. We received a telephone call from Paris earlier. The man has been identified. He’s a fairly dangerous character named Louis Cagalin, known as Big Louis. I can send you a copy of his record. He was born in a village in the Cantal. One evening when he was seventeen, on his way back from a party, his boss told him off because he was drunk and Louis hit him with a spade and almost killed him. Thanks to that, he was in a reformatory until the age of twenty-one. His conduct didn’t improve while he was there, and subsequently he was in trouble several times with the police, or rather with the gendarmerie, because he preferred to operate in the country.’

Another one who had lived under Loursat’s roof! Less than twenty metres from this study where Loursat had felt so at home! And he had never suspected that ...

‘I think Monsieur Ducup has reserved the right to interrogate the young people one by one. For my part, I’ve been to see Dr Matray, who was perfectly happy to give me all the information I needed. He confirmed that one evening, or rather one night, since it was one o’clock in the morning, Edmond Dossin came to fetch him and brought him to this house, asking for professional confidentiality. Big Louis had been quite seriously injured by the car the group had borrowed for their escapade. Subsequently, the doctor returned three times and each time Mademoiselle Nicole let him in. Twice, this Émile Manu was present.’

Loursat had recovered his usual heaviness, his lugubrious expression, his indifference.

‘Now, I still have to inform you of the most serious aspect. As you’ve seen, it’s beyond doubt that Big Louis was shot at point blank range with a 6.35-calibre revolver. I found the cartridge case in the room. On the other hand, I’ve been unable to trace the revolver.’

‘The murderer took it with him!’ Loursat said, as if that was obvious.

‘Yes. Or hid it! It’s all very tiresome.’

Binet got to his feet.

‘I don’t think I’ll need to come here again,’ he announced. ‘But if you want me to keep you up to date ...’

He had been gone for a good five minutes when Loursat said out loud:

‘What a strange little man!’

Then:

‘What was he actually here for? What was he trying to say?’

He looked at his desk, the stove, the bottle he had started, the cigarette smoking in the ashtray, the armchair that the portly chief inspector had occupied, then, as if tearing himself away from all that, opened the door with a sigh and set off to explore.

He had just reached the main staircase when someone loomed up in front of him, someone who must have been waiting for quite a while on a chair, just as Binet had waited in the study.

It took Loursat a moment to recognize Angèle, the maid Nicole had fired the previous day. True, she was wearing a dark hat and a blue tailored suit over a cream-coloured silk blouse that made her breasts look huge, and she was horribly made up, with rouge that was purplish-blue on the cheeks and black or blue on the eyelids.

‘Tell me, is she finally going to agree to see me?’

And there, at the top of the stairs, an unexpected scene ensued, a scene that Loursat endured almost without understanding. It was yet another thing he hadn’t suspected: the coarseness, the grating vulgarity of this girl who’d suddenly turned wild, this girl who for a while had lived under his roof, served him his meals and made his bed.

‘How much are you going to give me?’

Then, as he didn’t understand:

‘You’re not drunk again, are you? It’s not even time! Don’t think you can scare me with that stern look of yours, any more than your daughter who thinks she’s so high and mighty! And don’t think I can be pushed around! I take the train to go home for a good rest, I settle in at my parents’, and who

should show up but the gendarmes, who take me away like a thief, and won't even tell me what it's all about! At the courthouse, they make me wait more than an hour on a bench without even giving me a chance to eat! All because of your bitch of a daughter! But I told them, you can be sure of that!'

He was less attentive to the words than to their rhythm, the hatred, the scorn that emanated from this girl he had only ever seen in a black dress and a white apron.

'I know what things are like in villages. Nobody's going to believe the gendarmes came to get me for nothing! If anyone asks about me, there'll be people who'll do me wrong. You're rich enough to pay, even though you live like pigs.'

Live like pigs. The phrase struck him. He looked around him at the run-down house.

'So, how much are you giving me?'

'What did you tell the examining magistrate?'

'I told him everything! I told him how things worked here, things that if sensible people had been told about them before, nobody would have believed it. I even thought at first you were a bit crazy, both of you. Actually, all three of you, because that witch of yours isn't much better. Another bitch, that one! But that's nothing to do with me. As for the orgies that took place up there, with young people who should have been home in bed ...'

Would it have been preferable to silence her? But why? It was strange: he was following her very attentively, unable to get over so much passion, so much frenzy.

'And then she acts all innocent, and comes to check on the sugar and the butter in the kitchen! And makes remarks if the coffee isn't hot enough! But she drinks the hard stuff like a man! She pinches bottles from the cellar! She starts up the gramophone and dances until four in the morning!'

So there had even been a gramophone! And dancing!

'And afterwards I had to clean up all their mess! I had to be thankful when nobody had thrown up on the floor! Or when I didn't find one of them in bed in the morning because he hadn't been able to get away! Nice, isn't it? And then she treats servants like ...'

Loursat looked up. He had become aware of a slight noise. In the dimly lit corridor, behind Angèle, he saw his daughter, who had just come out of

her room and was standing there, listening.

He didn't say anything. Angèle now launched into an even more energetic tirade.

'If you want to know what I told the magistrate – by the end he was trying to shut me up! – I'm not ashamed to repeat it: I told him they should all be in jail, including your daughter. Only, there are some people nobody dares to touch! Ask her, your snooty little madam, what was in the packets. Or better still, ask her for the key to the attic, if they find it. As for the other one, the poor bastard, if they killed him, it may well be they had their reasons, though he was no better than they were. Well, have you heard enough? What are you looking at me like that for? With the harm it's done me and the time I've lost, I'd say it's worth a thousand francs.'

Nicole was still there, and he wondered if she was going to intervene.

'Did you tell the examining magistrate you'd be coming here to ask me for money?'

'I told him I wanted compensation. From the way he spoke to me, I realized what they were going to do! "Don't say too much ... Be careful ... While the investigation's still going on ..." And so on and so forth ... Because these kids are rich kids! One fine day it'll all be forgotten, and too bad for the poor bastard who got himself killed ... Well?'

'I'll let you have a thousand francs.'

Not because he was scared. Let alone to silence her. As far as he was concerned, it was worth it!

He walked to his desk to get the money, and took the opportunity to have a glass of wine. By the time he returned, Angèle had confidently sat down again.

'Thank you!' she said, folding the note and slipping it into her bag. Could it be that she felt remorse? She gave Loursat a surreptitious glance.

'I'm not saying that you, personally, are a bad man, but ...'

She didn't finish her thought. It was probably too vague. And besides, she had her money. Yet she didn't seem completely reassured.

'Don't put yourself out. I'll close the door.'

He stayed where he was, looking at his daughter, who was less than five metres from him, wearing a light-coloured dress. The only reason she didn't go straight back to her room was that she thought he was going to say something to her.

He would have liked to. He opened his mouth.

But what to say? And how to say it?

He didn't dare. He was intimidated. There were still too many things that eluded him. She understood him so well that she made up her mind, opened her door and disappeared.

Where had he been going when he had bumped into that fury? He had to make an effort to remember. Actually, he had been setting off somewhat aimlessly!

What had Angèle meant about the attic? Which attic was she referring to – there were four or five of them up there at the top of the house. And the packets? Packets of what?

He became aware that his telephone had been ringing for a few minutes, but the thought of answering it didn't occur to him for a while, and then only because the ringing was getting on his nerves.

Once again he was back in his study, where everything was stable, where the mess was his own warm mess.

'Hello ... Who? ... Marthe? ... What do you want?'

His sister! It was surprising she hadn't phoned before, from one of the chaises longues in her lovely modern villa, where she lay stretched out.

'If you cry while you speak, I warn you I won't be able to understand a thing.'

How this tall, pale, distinguished woman, always mournful, always wilting like a cut flower, could be his sister was beyond imagining!

'I don't give a damn!' he declared, sitting down and pouring himself a drink with one hand.

She was telling him that her son had been summoned to the examining magistrate.

'What are you talking about? Me?'

It was wonderful! His sister was blaming him for being the cause of it all because he'd brought up his daughter badly. And what else?

'You want me to do what I can to ...? Not on your life! ... Prison? Well, I don't think it would do them any harm ... Listen, Marthe ... I said listen! You're a bloody pain in the neck, you know that? ... Yes, you heard me! ... Have a good evening ...'

That hadn't happened to him in a long time, so long that it disturbed him. He had lost his temper, gone into a real rage that had come from deep inside him and had made his skin tingle. He took a deep breath and muttered:

'Damn!'

It got to the point that he hesitated to knock back his glass of wine. He wondered if he really wanted to drink himself to sleep like the other evenings.

The shutters weren't closed. Behind the satiny blue panes, there were street lamps, house fronts, cobblestones, occasionally people passing.

He suddenly remembered Rue d'Allier. He didn't dare ask himself if he would have liked to be there again, in the crowd, in the lights of Prisunic or outside the sumptuous delicatessen.

What time did the Georges bookshop close? The young man in the raincoat, Émile Manu, would be leaving. What would he do? Where would he go? If he'd been able to speak to Nicole ...

They must be quite scared, all of them: the son of the pork butcher, the one who was a bank clerk, and that idiot Dossin who was sent to the mountains every summer because, like his mother, he was of delicate health, while his father had a good time with every pretty girl he encountered on his business trips ...

The person who must be really put out was Rogissart, who, throughout his career as a magistrate, had lived in fear of some disaster or other!

Well, now he had his disaster! What kind of war council were they going to hold, he and his wife, in the insipid bedroom they shared?

Why had Loursat taken the crumpled paper from his pocket, spread it in front of him and smoothed it with his fingertips?

'Dossin ... Daillat ... Destrivaux ... Manu ...'

And the other one, the dead man, what was his name again? Louis Cagalin, known as Big Louis!

With his heavy hand, Loursat wrote this name down after the others, then reflected that it would have been more amusing to write it in red ink.

He did drink in the end, thinking that maybe it was best. Then he deliberately refilled the stove with meticulous care, checked the damper and poked the coals. It wasn't bad to repeat the gestures he'd known before, to live the life he'd lived before, not let himself get carried away just because

...

Because what, when it came down to it?

The door opened without anyone knocking. It was the Dwarf, as unpleasant as ever.

'There's a young man downstairs who's asking to see you.'

'Who is he?'

‘He didn’t say his name, but I know who he is.’

She was waiting, forcing him to question her.

‘Who is he?’

‘Monsieur Émile.’

That blasted Fine called him ‘Monsieur Émile’. Judging by the unctuous tone in which she said the name, there was no point asking her if she knew him, if he was the blue-eyed boy, if she was ready to defend him against her brute of a boss!

‘Émile Manu, you mean?’

‘Monsieur Émile,’ she corrected him. ‘Do you want to see him?’

He was alone in the dimly lit flag-stoned entrance hall, in his raincoat, walking back and forth and occasionally looking up at the wrought-iron staircase, at the top of which Joséphine finally appeared.

‘You can go up!’ she announced.

Loursat quickly poured himself a glass of wine to buck himself up and drank it almost furtively.

‘Sit down!’

But the young man was too tense to sit down. He rushed in, as if running ahead of himself, and stopped short when faced with the immediate reality of this overheated room and this bearded old man with bags under his eyes, huddled in his armchair.

‘I came to tell you—’

Without wanting to, perhaps in protest against something, Loursat cried:

‘Sit down, for heaven’s sake!’

True, he hated being seated when someone else was standing, but that was no reason to yell like that. Taken aback, the young man looked at him in terror, not even thinking of searching for a chair. He was wearing a beige raincoat, the same washed-out beige as those clothes that hang on racks outside off-the-peg clothing shops.

His poorly made shoes had been resoled several times.

Loursat suddenly got up, pushed an armchair towards his visitor, then sat down again with a sigh of pleasure.

‘You came to tell me ...’

The young man was flustered. The wind had been taken out of his sails, and he had lost his bearings. Yet he somehow kept his composure. He was a strange mixture of humility and pride.

Despite the stern look Loursat was giving him, he didn’t turn away and seemed to be saying:

‘Don’t think you’re scaring me!’

But his lips were quivering, and his hands shook as they fiddled with his soft hat.

‘I know what you’re thinking and why you came to the bookshop earlier.’

In his naivety and slyness, he was going on the attack. In his mind, his words meant:

‘You may be a lawyer, you may be elderly and live in a townhouse, you may be trying to impress me, but I’ve worked it all out.’

At that very moment, Loursat was wondering if he had ever been like this, thin and bony, with a prominent Adam’s apple, constantly ready to take offence, to rise up on his unformed calves. And at that age, would a man of forty-eight have inspired respect or fear in him?

His voice firmer now, Émile Manu declared:

‘It wasn’t me who killed Big Louis!’

Then he waited, still shaking, for his enemy to retaliate.

Loursat half grimaced, half smiled.

‘How do you know Big Louis was killed?’

He immediately realized the blunder he had just made. The newspapers, more precisely the one newspaper in Moulins, hadn’t said anything. The neighbours might have seen the van from the morgue parked opposite Loursat’s house, but they didn’t know the truth about what had happened.

‘Because I know!’

‘Did someone tell you?’

‘Yes. I got a note from Nicole earlier.’

He had made his choice, sensing that honesty was the best policy, and his expression proclaimed:

‘You see, I’m not trying to hide anything! You can observe me as you’re doing, watching my slightest reflexes.’

In order to provide proof of his sincerity, he took a paper from his pocket.

‘Here, read this.’

It was indeed Nicole’s tall, neat handwriting:

Big Louis is dead. The examining magistrate tormented me for two hours. I told him all about the accident and our get-togethers and gave him the names.

Nothing else. Nothing before, nothing after.

‘Did you already have this note when I came to the bookshop this afternoon?’

‘Yes.’

‘So someone brought it to you?’

‘Yes, Fine! She had other notes, one for each of us.’

So Nicole, soon after being questioned by Ducup, coolly wrote five or six letters! And the Dwarf ran all over town, delivering them!

‘There’s one thing I don’t understand, young man. Why have you come here to tell *me* that you didn’t kill Big Louis?’

‘Because you saw me!’

This time, he was openly challenging him, looking at him with an intensity that was embarrassing.

‘I knew you’d seen me and would probably recognize me. That’s why you came to the shop. If you tell the police, I’ll be arrested.’

A striking example of the mixture he represented, which so astounded Loursat: at that moment, he was as energetic and as passionate as a man, but a second later, his lower lip lifted like that of a child who is about to cry, and his features became so undefined, you wondered how you could ever have taken him seriously.

‘If I’m arrested, my mother ...’

Clenching his fists and trying not to cry, he leaped to his feet, hatred in his eyes towards this man who was humiliating him and who, at a time like this, was slowly drinking a glass of wine.

‘I know you don’t believe me when I say I’ll go to prison and my mother will lose all her pupils.’

‘Hold on, hold on! Would you like some wine? No? Just settle down! You mention your mother, not your father.’

‘He died a long time ago.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He was an industrial draughtsman at Dossin’s.’

‘Where do you live? Is it just you and your mother?’

‘Yes. I’m an only child. We live in Rue Ernest-Voivenon.’

A new street in a new neighbourhood near the cemetery, with clean, modest houses for modest people. The young man hated living in Rue Ernest-Voivenon, that much was clear from the way he had uttered the name. He was proud. He even overdid it, crying:

‘What business is it of yours?’

‘I asked you to sit down.’

‘Sorry!’

‘Since it was you I saw going down the backstairs, I’d be curious to know what it was you were doing on the second floor. You’d not long left Nicole’s room. I assume you were on your way out?’

‘Yes.’

How would Loursat himself have behaved if, at the age of eighteen or nineteen, he had found himself in a similar situation? After all, the boy was dealing with a father, a father who was aware that he’d been leaving his daughter’s room at midnight!

It was precisely now they were getting to the crux of the matter that Manu appeared calmer.

‘I was going to go down and leave by the alleyway when, just as I got to the stairs, the gunshot went off. I don’t know why I went up instead of running away. Someone was coming out of Big Louis’s room.’

‘So you saw the killer?’

‘No. There was no light in the corridor.’

He was clearly anxious to appear as open as possible, implying by his words:

‘You see, I’m not lying! I swear I didn’t recognize him!’

‘What happened then?’

‘The man must have seen me or heard me.’

‘So it was a man?’

‘I assume so.’

‘It couldn’t have been Nicole, for example?’

‘No, I’d only just left her at the door of her room.’

‘What did the man do?’

‘He ran to the end of the corridor, went into a room and shut the door behind him. I got scared and went downstairs.’

‘Without bothering to find out what had happened to Big Louis?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you leave immediately?’

‘No. I stayed on the ground floor, listening, while you went upstairs.’

‘So apart from you, there was someone else in the house?’

‘I’ve told you the truth!’

The words came thick and fast now.

‘I came to ask you, if it’s not already too late, not to say I was here. My mother has had enough bad luck in her life. We’ll be made to take the blame for everything. We’re not rich.’

Loursat didn’t move. The light from his desk lamp left him in shadow, making him seem heavier, more massive.

‘I also wanted to tell you ...’

Émile Manu's nose was running. He sniffed and lowered his head, then raised it again with a speed that signalled a new defiance.

'I was planning to ask you for Nicole's hand. If all this hadn't happened, I'd have made sure that my circumstances ...'

Always money, always his circumstances, always that inferiority complex under which he laboured and against which he struggled clumsily, to the point of becoming aggressive!

'Were you planning to leave the Georges bookshop?'

'You don't think I'm going to be a shop assistant all my life?'

'Obviously not! I suppose you'd have gone to Paris?'

'Yes!'

'You'd have gone into business?'

The young man sensed the irony in his voice.

'I don't know if I'd have gone into business, but I'd have got by as well as anyone.'

And now the little fool was sobbing! It was all Loursat's fault: he hadn't known how to handle him, and now he was looking at him sternly, although with a reluctant hint of pity.

'I love Nicole, and she loves me.'

'I have every reason to think so, since she sees you at night in her room.'

Loursat couldn't help himself: it was impossible to resist. And yet he realized that, to a young man, he must seem quite fearsome, especially in the already daunting atmosphere of the study.

'We'd sworn to get married.'

Having searched all through his pockets, he had finally found a handkerchief and was able to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. He sniffed again and raised his head.

'How long have you known Nicole?'

'A very long time. She often came into the shop to exchange her books.'

'Is that how your relationship started?'

'No. I was only an assistant!'

Again! How stifled he must have been by the mediocrity of his circumstances!

'Plus, my mother would tell me about her. She used to come here to give her piano lessons. That's how she made enough to raise me after my father died. The main reason she told me about Nicole was because most of the

time the lessons never took place. At eleven in the morning, Nicole was still asleep.'

There were times, such as now, when he seemed capable of speaking calmly, of presenting his story coherently.

'It was Luska who suggested I introduce myself to the group.'

'Who's Luska?'

'Don't you know old Luska's shop? It's opposite the boys' school. They sell toys, marbles, sweets, fishing rods. The son works at Prisunic.'

Why did the mention of the boys' school and a man who sold marbles make Loursat turn his head away? In his day, Luska's shop hadn't existed. Instead, a woman known as Old Mother Pinaud had sold candies and red dates from a little table opposite the school ...

If the young man hadn't been there, Loursat might perhaps have gone and checked his face in the mirror: he was almost surprised to feel that thick growth of beard.

'So, who did Luska introduce you to, and where?'

'At Jo's place!'

'Who's Jo?'

'An ex-boxer who runs the Boxing Bar near the market.'

The most disturbing thing was that Loursat was living through this hour on two different levels. He was here, obviously, sitting at his desk, his thick hips filling the whole armchair, his badly tended fingers rummaging in his beard. And there was the bottle of wine on his right, the stove behind him, the books lining the walls, all the familiar objects in their place.

Only, for the first time, he was aware of being here, of being Loursat, of being forty-eight years old and being so heavy, so bearded, so dirty! He was listening to Émile Manu's voice, now hesitant, now rapid, but the young man was no longer looking at him, except in the odd surreptitious glance.

'I used to be as thin as him,' he was telling himself.

But he'd had hardly any friends. He'd lived alone, excited about ideas, about philosophy and poetry. Might that have been the source of all the trouble? He tried to see himself as he had been then, especially when he had courted Geneviève.

And meanwhile, Émile Manu, who couldn't have guessed in what spaces Loursat's mind was wandering, was diligently telling his story:

'I went there, and that's the evening the accident happened. I'm just not lucky. It runs in the family. My father died when he was thirty-three.'

Loursat was the more surprised of the two to hear himself asking:

‘What did he die of?’

‘Pneumonia. He caught it one Sunday when we went to see an air show and it started raining.’

Who else was it who’d died of pneumonia? Geneviève’s brother, but he’d been even younger, only twenty-four, not long after Loursat got married.

He couldn’t find any more cigarettes on the desk, and that upset him. It seemed to him that between Geneviève’s day and now, there was not so much a hole as a filthy, stagnant pool in which he was still wading.

No, damn it! Where was this young man, this excitable boy stiff with pride, dragging him?

‘You took a car that didn’t belong to you, didn’t you?’

‘Edmond told me that was what they did whenever Daillat couldn’t get hold of the van.’

‘I see! Because usually these rides used the pork butcher’s van?’

‘That’s right. Since the garage is quite some way from the house, his father didn’t know they were taking it.’

‘In other words, the parents didn’t know anything! What kinds of things did you do at Jo’s place?’

‘Edmond taught me how to play *écarté* and poker.’

Another one, his sister Marthe, who would pull a face when she learned all this about her son! In fact, the case of Edmond Dossin was even the most appalling of all: a tall, fragile young man, with pink cheeks and feminine eyes, always waiting hand and foot on his sick mother!

‘Was Edmond the leader?’

‘Pretty much. There wasn’t a leader strictly speaking, but ...’

‘I get the idea!’

‘As I was new, they got me drunk. Then they talked me into driving to the Auberge aux Noyés.’

‘I assume Nicole went with you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which of you was she with mostly? After all, I suppose ...’

Émile turned crimson. ‘I don’t know. I thought that too. Later, he swore to me on his mother’s life that there was nothing between them.’

‘Who?’

‘Dossin. It was a game. They both let the others think it. They deliberately talked and acted as if they were together.’

‘Did you take a car at random?’

‘Yes. I have my licence. It might come in useful one day. But we don’t have a car, so I’m out of practice. It was raining. On the way back—’

‘Hold on a minute! What did you do in that country inn?’

‘Nothing. It was closed when we got there. It’s a kind of riverside tavern. The woman who owns it got up and made her daughters get up too.’

‘So there were girls!’

‘Two of them. Eva and Clara. I’m pretty sure it’s not what you think. I’d had the same idea. Edmond tried to make me think so too. We danced to gramophone records. There was nothing left to drink except beer and white wine. In the end, we decided to—’

‘To continue the party here!’

‘Yes.’

Externally, Loursat’s attitude hadn’t changed, and yet Émile sensed that now he could say anything.

‘I don’t know how the accident happened. They’d already been mixing my drinks at the Boxing Bar, and then at the inn I’d had some white wine. By the time I tried to brake, it was too late. I threw up. It was Daillat who got in behind the wheel, and I actually think they had to help me up the stairs.’

‘Up here?’

‘Yes. I fell asleep. I woke up at four in the morning, when the doctor had already left.’

‘What about Nicole?’

‘She was watching over me. The others had gone home, except for Big Louis, who was lying in bed looking at us. I was ashamed. I apologized to Nicole and this man I didn’t yet know.’

He stood up once again, wondering if it might have been a mistake to talk so much, if Loursat might be trying to trap him.

Passing abruptly from one idea to another, he said in a categorical tone:

‘If the police try to arrest me, I’ll kill myself first!’

It wasn’t clear what this had to do with his confession, or why he went on, once again on edge:

‘I don’t know why I came. I guess it was stupid of me. But before I leave, I want to ask you if you’ll allow me to have a word with Nicole.’

‘Sit down!’

‘I can’t go on like this. I’m sorry, but I’ve had a horrible day. My mother doesn’t suspect a thing. Although she’s been worried for two weeks now, because I come home at such odd times. But is that my fault?’

Was he hoping that Loursat would buck him up? It looked like it. And it wasn’t cynicism. He wasn’t doing it deliberately! The only thing that mattered to him was himself, nothing but himself, or rather himself and Nicole – but it was the same thing, because Nicole didn’t exist outside of him!

Did Loursat, when his wife had left ...?

Returning to familiar territory, he knocked back a large glass of wine, wondering as he did so why, while listening to these stories about the group of youngsters, he’d thought so much about himself, as he only now realized. For an hour, he’d been thinking about himself much more than about Émile, Nicole and their friends. He’d been mixing everything up, as if there might be some connection between what was happening now and what had happened in the past.

There was no connection, no resemblance! He wasn’t poor like Manu, or Jewish like Luska, or sickly like his nephew Edmond Dossin. He didn’t frequent places like the Boxing Bar and didn’t amuse himself passing his cousin off as his mistress.

Between him and them, there wasn’t only the gap of a generation. He was a loner! That was the truth he was looking for! Even when he was young, he’d been a loner, out of pride. He had thought you could be solitary in a couple! Then, when one day he had found the house empty ...

So why did it upset him so much now to feel his coarse beard beneath his fingers?

Was he going to admit to himself that the feeling that had overcome him was all too much like humiliation?

Because he was forty-eight? Because he was unkempt, almost dirty? Because he drank?

He didn’t want to think about it any more. Twice already he had heard the dinner bell and had ignored it.

Footsteps echoed in the long corridor. The doorknob was turning. The person who wanted to come in changed their mind and knocked.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s me.’

Nicole's steady voice. Loursat opened the door. He hadn't been aware that his daughter knew Manu was there, but obviously the Dwarf hadn't failed to tell her.

That was why she was so calm, damn it. Her carefully smoothed blond hair lay heavy on the back of the neck, her eyes were placid in her dark face.

'I didn't want to disturb you.'

She came towards Manu, her hand held out.

'Good evening, Émile.'

It was Loursat, all in all, who ended up looking superfluous!

'Good evening, Nicole. I've told your father everything.'

'You did the right thing.'

They were so familiar with one another! The Dwarf, surly towards everyone, called him Monsieur Émile. Of the people in the house, they were the ones who knew each other, who formed a unit! They were the family!

And it was Émile whom Nicole asked:

'Have the two of you decided anything?'

Loursat turned his back on them, not confident enough of his facial expression, reluctant to show signs of inferiority. His one resource was to pour himself another drink. Why should his doing that disgust them? Didn't they drink? Wasn't their group's main activity getting drunk while playing gramophone records and dancing?

Should he try and apologize? But nobody had attacked him! Since he had his back to them, he didn't even know if they were showing disgust or only disapproval.

The truth of it ...

Yes, the truth of it, he was forced to admit, the thing that embarrassed him, the thing that since a while back, perhaps since morning, perhaps since a long time ago, the thing that ended up creating a kind of anguish and having the sickly taste of shame, was that he was alone!

Alone in time and space! Alone with himself, with a big, neglected body, an unkempt beard and eyes his ailing liver had turned yellow, alone with thoughts that had ended up going stale and with Burgundy that often disgusted him.

When he turned, the stern expression had returned to his face.

'What are you waiting for?'

They didn't know, the poor things! Thrown, Émile clung to Nicole's calm.

'Can I see him out?' she asked.

He didn't reply, merely shrugged his shoulders.

They hadn't taken ten steps along the corridor before he went over to the fireplace and looked at himself in the mirror.

'Hello? Is that you, Hector?'

The Pain in the Neck again!

'I'm going mad with worry. Couldn't you come over for a while? Charles is in Paris on business. I tried to explain the situation to him on the phone, but he can't get back before tomorrow.'

Loursat remained completely calm. Even if his sister had been writhing in agony at his feet, he probably wouldn't have reacted. As for his scented brother-in-law who, at this hour, must be dining in a private room, surrounded by pretty women ...!

'Listen to me! Edmond hasn't come home ... I hardly dare talk of it on the phone. Do you think they're listening in?'

He deliberately didn't reply!

'He's still with the examining magistrate. Ducup just called me. I mean, I asked him through Rogissart to keep me up to date. Apparently, the interrogation isn't over yet. Ducup didn't go into details, but he implied that it's much more serious than he'd thought and that it'll be difficult to hush things up.'

'So what?' he said in his raspiest voice.

'But, Hector—'

'What?'

'It's in your house that it all happened. It was Nicole who ... I mean, if only you'd kept an eye on her ... No, forgive me, that's not what I meant to say. I'm sick with worry, don't you understand? I've had to take to my bed and I've just called the doctor.'

Just as she sent for him three or four times a week, for no reason, because she had the vapours or was simply bored!

Illness for her was what red wine was for her brother!

'Listen, Hector. Please make an effort and come to see me soon. Or rather, if you'd be so kind—'

'I'm not kind!'

‘Oh, be quiet, I know you’re not like that! I can’t go to the courthouse myself in the state I’m in. Could you go there and pick up Edmond if they’ve finished with him? I’m so afraid he’ll do something stupid! Bring him back to me. Then you can advise me. Above all, you can advise him.’

Did he answer yes or no? He muttered something, in any case. He hung up and found himself standing at his desk, frowning because it smelt of intruders.

Nicole had left the door open when she went out. He walked along the corridor and into the dining room, where he found his daughter in her seat.

She stood up as if at a signal and opened the hatch to the dumb waiter.

‘The soup, Fine!’

She avoided looking at him. What could she be thinking of him? What had Manu told her after she had walked him to the door? What had their embrace been like?

All at once, he was weary. There was a sadness in him, the kind he felt in the mornings before he’d had his first glasses of wine.

‘What kind of soup is this?’ he asked.

‘Split pea.’

‘Then why aren’t there any croutons?’

Fine had forgotten! Split-pea soup was never served without croutons! That made him fly off the handle.

‘Obviously, if she’s running around taking notes to all the young men in town, she can’t bother with the cooking! And, of course, nobody’s looked for a new maid!’

He saw surprise in Nicole’s eyes. He didn’t realize that it was the first time in years he’d taken an interest in such things.

‘I found one. She’s coming tomorrow morning.’

That made him almost furious. So, in spite of all that had happened, in spite of the interrogation, the notes she had written, in spite of the police being in the house, in spite of ... well, in spite of everything, she’d gone to the trouble of replacing Angèle!

‘Where’s she from?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘From a convent.’

‘What?’

‘She was a servant in a convent. Now she’s engaged to be married. Her name’s Éléonore.’

He could hardly throw a tantrum just because the name of the maid who'd been hired was Éléonore!

He ate his soup. He was halfway through when he became aware of how noisily he was eating, slurping with his head down like a badly brought-up child or a peasant.

He threw his daughter a sideways glance. She wasn't looking at him. She was used to it! She was eating quite calmly, thinking of something else.

He quickly plunged his nose back in his plate, because, for no reason, something idiotic, perfectly idiotic, was happening to him, something he didn't understand, which had no reason for being: his eyes were smarting and his face puffing up.

He must have looked a pretty sight!

But what did all these bloody kids ...

'Where are you going, father?'

She said 'father'! Not 'dad', of course! That would have been the last straw! It was impossible for him to reply immediately. Having thrown his napkin down on his chair, he headed for the door.

He was almost there before he was able to mutter:

'To Aunt Marthe's!'

Phew!

What made it worse was that he really was putting on his coat to go there!

He had the impression he was descending into life. He was making gestures he had forgotten – or that he perhaps still made, but without realizing it – such as raising the collar of his overcoat to keep warm and plunging his hands in his pockets as he savoured the cold and the rain, the mystery of the streets glittering with reflections.

At this hour, there were still people moving around the town, and it occurred to him to wonder where they were going. When was the last time he'd gone out in the evening? In Rue d'Allier, there were new lights, and the cinema wasn't in the same place as the old one, which had announced its shows with a continuous bell.

Loursat walked quickly. The glances he cast at people and things were still only furtive, as if ashamed. He wasn't going to give in straight away. He was grunting as he walked, and by the time he rang at the Dossins' glass and wrought-iron door, his hostility had returned. When the butler, who wore a white jacket like a barman, tried to take his coat, he gave him a scornful look.

'Where's my sister?'

'Madame is in the small boudoir. If Monsieur would be so kind as to follow me ...'

What if he refused to wipe his feet, as a protest against this very white entrance hall, against all this newness, this modernity, this flashiness? He didn't do so, although he did think of it. But he did light a cigarette and throw his match on the floor.

'Come in, Hector ... Shut the door, Joseph. If Monsieur Edmond comes back, ask him to come and see me immediately.'

He was already bristling like a porcupine. He didn't like his sister, even though she had never done anything to him. He resented her for her constant mournfulness, the pale colours she dressed in, her flabby, half-

hearted elegance, and perhaps also for being married to Dossin, living in this townhouse and having well-trained servants.

It wasn't jealousy. He was probably as rich as she was.

'Sit down, Hector. It's kind of you to come. Have you dropped by the courthouse? What do you know exactly? What has Nicole told you? You did get her to talk, didn't you?'

'I don't know anything at all, except that they killed a man in my house.'

He wondered why he resented them so much, and couldn't find a satisfactory answer. True, he despised them for their vanity, for this townhouse they had built that had become their reason for being. As far as he was concerned, Dossin, with his moustache that always smelt of liqueurs or young women, was the epitome of the happy idiot.

'You don't mean, Hector, that it's the children who ...'

'It certainly looks like it.'

She stood up despite her illness – she'd had stomach problems ever since Edmond was born.

'Are you mad? Or else, if this is a joke, you're being horrible. I'm so jittery, you know. I phoned you because I couldn't bear all this anxiety on my own. You come running, which should have surprised me, only to tell me cynically that our children—'

'You asked me for the truth, didn't you?'

Basically, if nothing had happened in the past, his wife – because he would have a wife – would be about the same age now as Marthe. Would they have followed the trend that had led a number of important Moulins families to build new houses in the past few years?

It was hard to say. There were so many things he was thinking about, all at the same time, as he looked at his sister. Above all, it struck him how impossible it was to imagine the way he would be now if he were married, perhaps with other children, or what he would have done in all those years.

'Listen, Hector, I know you aren't always in a normal frame of mind. I have no idea if you've been drinking today. But you must realize that now's not the time to shut yourself up in that filthy study of yours! What's happening is partly your fault. If you'd brought up your daughter properly —'

'Tell me, Marthe, did you send for me just to tell me off?'

'Yes, if it's necessary to make you realize where your duty lies. These children are irresponsible. In a normal household, they wouldn't have been

able to get in at night and indulge their every whim. Do you know what I wonder? If it's true that you didn't know what was going on! Look at you, you're not even reacting. You're a lawyer. At the courthouse they feel sorry for you, but they respect you all the same.'

She had said 'all the same'! And that they felt sorry for him!

'I don't know if Nicole takes after her mother, but—'

'Marthe!'

'What?'

'Come here.'

'Why?'

To slap her! Which he now did, as surprised by his gesture as she was.

'Get my meaning?'

He had never before been rough with her, except when they were very little.

'I don't care about your husband, or ...'

He stopped dead, just in time. Was it possible, despising them as he did, every single one of them, and having had the strength to live alone in his corner, in his hole, for eighteen years, that he should now stoop to such arguments? To yell in his sister's face that her husband, who was constantly travelling, was also constantly cheating on her, that the whole town knew it, that she herself knew it and that people attributed her bad health and that of her son to a particular chronic disease?

He looked in vain for his hat, which the butler had taken from him. Marthe was crying. It was hard to think that they were both over forty, and consequently that they were what are known as reasonable people.

'Are you leaving?'

'Yes.'

'Aren't you going to wait for Edmond?'

'He just has to come and see me tomorrow morning if there's any news.'

'You've been drinking, haven't you?'

'No!'

But he was irritated, and what irritated him, if you went deep into things, was this question he was asking himself for the first time:

'Why have I lived like a bear for eighteen years?'

He had even got to the point of wondering if it was really because of Geneviève, because she had run off with another man and hurt him badly.

Hadn't his student room in Paris been just as untidy, with the same unhealthy intimacy, as his study today? Even back then, he had spent hours on end browsing through books, feeding on poetry and philosophy, breathing his own smell with a kind of shameful pleasure.

In the entrance hall, he snatched his hat from the hands of the butler, then turned and looked him up and down.

'What's he thinking?' he wondered.

The truth was, he had never tried to live. He had realized this when he had descended into the town earlier, and the most alarming thing was that he was going back there, that he had no desire to go home.

Just as he had looked at the butler, now he turned to look at shadowy, furtive figures of the night, made all the more mysterious by the damp air.

What did his sister imagine? Not the truth, for sure! People felt sorry for him, she'd said! They thought of him as an eccentric, a poor devil, why not as a failure?

He hated them all, he despised them! The Ducups, the Dossins, the Rogissarts and all the others who thought they were alive because ...

His overcoat smelt of soaked wool, and beads of water trembled in the hairs of his beard. As he walked down Rue d'Allier, keeping close to the buildings, it struck him, for some reason, that he was like a middle-aged gentleman slinking towards a house of ill repute.

He passed a brasserie. The windows were steamed up, but through the smoke, men could still be seen playing billiards, others playing cards, and it occurred to Loursat that he had never been able to join in other people's peaceful, everyday lives. He envied these men. He envied everything that was alive around him, these strangers walking, going somewhere.

And Émile Manu! Vibrating like a cable that's too taut, so tense and excitable that it was wearying to keep up with the successive transformations of his face as he talked about his love and about death, as he defied Loursat, one minute imploring, the next watchful, the next once again threatening!

Manu and his companions had walked down these streets at times like these, Nicole with them! Day by day, hour by hour, they had created their own adventure.

During that time, their parents had pretended to be alive, decorating their houses, fussing over their servants' uniforms, the quality of their cocktails, the success of a dinner or a bridge party ...

Marthe had talked about her son, but did that mean she knew him? Not in the slightest! Any more than the previous day Loursat had known Nicole!

Coming to the Boxing Bar, he didn't hesitate. He opened the door and shook his wet overcoat.

The small, dimly lit room was almost empty. A cat lay asleep on a table. The owner was playing cards with two women near the counter, two women who clearly belonged to the underground breed you meet at night in the streets.

He had never been aware that such things existed in Moulins. He took a seat and crossed his legs. Jo put down his cigarette and his cards, stood up and came towards him.

'What can I get you?'

He ordered a toddy. Jo put the water to boil on a hot plate, all the while observing his customer surreptitiously. The two women were also looking at him, smoking their cigarettes. It seemed as if one of them might be about to try to seduce him, but Jo signalled to her that there was no point.

The cat was purring. Everything was very calm. Outside, nobody passed.

'Maybe you'd like to have a little chat, Monsieur Loursat?' Jo said, at last putting the toddy down on the table.

'Do you know me?'

'I thought it was you when you came in this afternoon. I've heard talk, know what I mean?'

Instinctively, he looked over to a corner table, probably the one where the young people usually sat.

'Do you mind?'

He sat down. The two women were waiting, resigned.

'I'm surprised the police haven't come to question me yet. Not that I have anything to do with any of this! On the contrary, if anyone could calm them down, it was me! But you know how it is at that age ...'

He was at his ease, capable of the same casualness in front of the examining magistrate or in court.

'Not to mention that most of it was just talk! Want to know what I think? It was watching gangster films that turned their heads. That's why they acted all free and easy, like they were hardened criminals. But if you're thinking I had anything to do with any of it, you're barking up the wrong tree. Isn't that so?'

He had raised his voice to address the two women.

‘What did I tell the two of you? Didn’t I say they’d get me in trouble one of these days? ... Mind you, once they’d drunk their fill, I always refused to keep serving them. The other evening, when the young one came, the new one, Émile, and tried his damndest to borrow money from me in exchange for a watch, I gave him twenty francs but told him I didn’t want the watch. At my age, if you know what I mean ...’

He was intrigued by Loursat, who probably wasn’t quite the way he’d imagined. What had the kids said about him? They’d probably said he was someone befuddled with drink.

Jo smiled, already more familiar.

‘The thing that always amazed me was that you didn’t hear anything. Some nights it went on until five in the morning. I even wondered ...’

‘What will you have?’ Loursat asked.

Jo gave him a slight wink. It wouldn’t have taken much for him to nudge Loursat with his elbow, and the latter wouldn’t have been annoyed. On the contrary!

‘I’ll have a little crème de menthe. A refill for you?’

Passing the girls, he winked at them too. One of them stood up, tugged at her dress and, through the dress, at her knickers, which were too tight around her buttocks.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ she announced.

Soon afterwards, Loursat and Jo were alone in the syrupy calm of the bar.

‘You want my opinion? I guess I’m more likely to know than anyone else. Not that they confided in me, I wouldn’t have liked that. But they came almost every evening and I’d hear them talking, without letting on. For instance, that girl of yours. I’d lay bets there was nothing between her and Monsieur Edmond. I’ll go further. I’m pretty sure Monsieur Edmond isn’t interested in women. I’ve known people like that. He’s not strong. I’d swear he’s shy. And shy people brag. As for the young one ...’

The young one was Émile Manu, and Loursat quite liked hearing him being talked about in a sympathetic tone.

‘That first evening, I’d have been happy to tell him to leave while he could. Like the other one, Luska, they call him, the one who works all day out on the street outside Prisunic. What I’m trying to say is this: Monsieur Edmond, and another one who came from time to time, whose name I forget, the son of a businessman, they could get up at any time of the morning. Plus, if there’s any trouble, their parents are always there. But

when I see kids who don't get enough to eat, who probably come from homes where they count every penny ... They want to do as much as the others, or more. I doubt that one had ever had a hard drink, you could see it from his face ... They didn't come the next day, but two days later Monsieur Edmond told me they'd knocked a man down and were looking after him in your house. "Take my advice," I told them, "go to the police and ..."

Occasionally Loursat had to make an effort to convince himself that it was he himself who was here, listening, wanting to hear more, even to ask questions.

'Did you know Big Louis?'

'No, but I heard about him, and I knew right away what he was like. A shifty kind of character, like most of these country thugs. The kind of vagrant who'd happily strangle a little girl if he found her alone in the woods, or attack an old couple for their savings. I guess you know all that better than me, you're a lawyer ... The mistake they made was to panic and not leave him by the side of the road. Obviously, when he found himself in a townhouse, with these kids scared out of their wits and your daughter looking after him like a nurse, he decided to take advantage. He'd hit the motherlode! Now, as for what he made them do ...'

He humbly offered Loursat a cigarette and lit it for him.

'All I can tell you is that the others weren't happy about it at all. They weren't enjoying themselves like before. Sometimes I'd hear them whispering, but they shut up as soon as I got too close. I mean, it was none of my business, was it? As for knowing how they planned to get rid of him ... After all, they couldn't leave the body in your house. They at least had to transport it to the river ... Look, I might as well tell you this. Just today, at midday, Monsieur Edmond came in here after his class. He was even whiter than usual, with rings under his eyes like a woman that's just had a baby. I wasn't sure I should serve him. "One of us did something stupid!" he said. "Those idiots take everything seriously." I looked at him, hoping he'd continue. But he seemed to be in a hurry. "We're in it up to our necks now!" he said as he was leaving. "My mother isn't going to like this."

The Dwarf, speaking about Manu, called him 'Monsieur Émile' in an affectionate tone. Jo the Boxer, speaking about Dossin, called him 'Monsieur Edmond', perhaps because he was the son of a rich manufacturer

of agricultural machinery, perhaps also because he seemed to be the leader and because he was the one who most often paid the bill.

It was as if Loursat had opened a book, and was now browsing through it, snatching greedily at the slightest morsel of truth.

Jo had got so used to him, to that big head, dishevelled hair and watery eyes, that he stood up and announced:

‘The next round’s on me!’

He refilled Loursat’s glass without asking, and sat down again, completely unembarrassed.

‘When you came in this afternoon, I assumed you were going to question me. Then I thought about it and realized that with the kind of kids involved, the whole thing would be sorted out. But now it seems they’ve summoned Monsieur Edmond to the courthouse.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘The one who works in a bank. What’s his name again? Destrivieux, I think. I never understood what he was doing with that lot. Do you know him?’

‘No.’

‘A tall, thin kid. Obviously, at that age, they’re all pretty thin, except for the pork butcher. But a particular kind of thin kid, with glasses, parted hair, comes across so respectable and so shy, he always got on my nerves. Apparently, his father’s been a cashier in the same bank for thirty years. I leave you to think of the rows that’s going to cause! He’s in a terrible state.’

‘The father?’

‘No, the son! He came here on his bike, after the bank closed. I think he’d been sent a note.’

A note from Nicole, damn it! She hadn’t left anyone out, and the Dwarf had dashed all over town!

‘He didn’t dare go home. He asked me, as if it didn’t concern him, if the police could easily track someone down in Paris. I told him not to do it, because it’d only take them a few months.’

Was it that he suddenly felt worried, faced with Loursat’s excessive calm?

‘You’re going to take care of it, aren’t you? They say, when you defend a case, you’re quite something, but it doesn’t happen often. Anyway, if you need me to testify ... I’ve had my troubles in my time, like anyone else, but

since the last amnesty, my criminal record has been clean. They aren't even allowed to talk about it any more!'

Loursat couldn't make up his mind to leave. He was angry at himself for being here, listening, and yet he was as overexcited as a child being told a story and hoping it will never end.

'What is this Auberge aux Noyés of theirs?' he asked, resisting the desire to order a fourth drink.

His eyes were already smarting. He felt hot. He mustn't overdo it this evening.

'To be honest, it's nothing much. They always imagined things. For instance, if they happened to see a pal of mine in here, they'd immediately assume he was a dangerous ex-convict. Other times, they were convinced the police were watching them and I kept having to go out in the street to have a look. I think they'd all bought guns, but they wouldn't have dared use them.'

'One of them did!' Loursat cut in.

In his home! In his house! And nobody in the town – he even less than everyone else – had suspected that a group of youngsters had been living a life on the fringes of other people's lives.

Edmond was kind to his mother, as kind as a daughter, she loved to say, holding him up as an example. And in the evening ...

'How much do I owe you?'

'Sixteen francs. I'm giving you a special rate, like them. Do you think whoever fired the shot will be able to claim extenuating circumstances?'

He spoke almost like a professional, avoiding certain words.

'They've been quite harsh for some time now. In Rouen, they executed a kid who was only nineteen.'

At the corner of the street, Loursat passed one of the two women. She was holding an umbrella and was pacing up and down the pavement, perched on her high heels. She bade him a friendly goodnight.

He couldn't resign himself to going home, back to his study where he had been entrenched for eighteen years. He'd almost reached Place d'Allier when an empty taxi passed, and he abruptly hailed it.

'Do you know a country inn called the Auberge aux Noyés?'

'Near the old post office?'

'I think so.'

'Do you want me to drive you there?'

The driver, a decent family man, gave his customer a critical glance and finally opened the door.

‘It’ll be sixty francs both ways.’

When was the last time he had taken a taxi, especially at night? He had almost forgotten the feel of the streets, or what the outskirts of town looked like, beyond the cemetery. It was here that they had built the new neighbourhood where Émile Manu and his mother lived.

‘There’s something burning!’ the driver said, turning his head.

It was a cigarette end that Loursat had dropped on the rug. He stubbed it out.

‘You know, it’s quite likely they’ll all be asleep.’

It was an old private car, with no separation between the driver and his passenger. The driver would have liked to chat. The windscreen wipers moved back and forth, making an irritating noise. From time to time, the lights of other cars passed.

‘Hold on, I think this is where we have to turn. Don’t often get the chance to come out here.’

At the end of a rutted path, two hundred metres from a farmhouse with whitewashed walls, they glimpsed reflections on the river, a low, muddy bank and a two-storey building with lighted windows.

‘Will you be long?’

‘I don’t think so.’

He had read everything, digested everything, he had reflected, day by day, year by year, on every human problem, and yet he didn’t know how to make certain gestures, how to walk into a country inn, how to sit down at a table.

He didn’t even know, to be honest, that such places existed, and he advanced diagonally, looking around in mistrust.

It was yet another banal little room, cleaner than they usually are in the country, its walls painted in oil, with advertising chromos and a pitch-pine counter.

For some reason, you didn’t have the impression you were entering a public place, in spite of the rows of tables and the bottles on a shelf. It was too calm, as intimate as a middle-class kitchen. The cream-coloured curtains at the windows were drawn.

At a table, a man was sitting, a middle-aged man whom Loursat took for a grain or poultry merchant. In fact, he thought he had glimpsed a van with

its lights off parked in front of the door.

A young girl was at his table, and when the door had opened it had seemed to Loursat that the customer had abruptly withdrawn his hand from her lap.

Now, the two of them were looking at him and waiting, either curious or annoyed, probably both. Loursat sat down by himself and once again shook his heavy overcoat.

The girl came over to him. 'What are you having?' she asked.

'A toddy.'

'The fire's out and we don't have gas. You can have a glass of rum if you like.'

She opened a polished door and yelled up the stairs:

'Mum! Eva!'

Then she returned to her companion, put her elbows on the table and smiled with as much kindness as was possible for someone who was asleep on her feet.

'And what did you say to him?' she asked, resuming the conversation where Loursat had interrupted it.

The inner door had remained open. Behind, in the darkness, he saw a woman come to look at him, a thin woman in her forties, who had already put in her curlers for the night.

Their eyes met, and she withdrew and disappeared, probably going upstairs, where the footsteps of two people could next be heard. Five minutes went by before Eva appeared. She was so similar to the other girl, it was immediately obvious that they were sisters. As she approached, Loursat was aware of a sickly smell, typical of a sleeping woman.

'Did you order something?'

'A rum!' the other girl said.

'A large one?'

He said yes. Everything interested him. He didn't want to let anything pass him by. He was trying to imagine the group of young people and Nicole ... Émile Manu, who had gone out that evening for the first time and was drunk ...

They were watching him, trying to figure out why he was here. Eva served him his drink, but didn't dare sit down at his table. She stood near him for a moment, then went and took up position behind the counter. The grain merchant took his wallet from his pocket.

‘What do I owe you?’

‘Leaving so soon?’

He glanced over at Loursat, as if to say:

‘Do you think this is fun for me?’

Growing affectionate, she walked him to the door. Behind it, she probably kissed his cheek furtively and allowed him to caress her.

By the time she came back in, she had lost her gusto, but tried to recover a little of it, saying to Loursat:

‘Filthy weather!’

Then:

‘You’re not from round here, are you? Are you a commercial traveller?’

Neither of the girls was ugly. In fact, they were quite pretty, but dull.

‘I’m thirsty, Eva! ... Will you buy me a lemonade, monsieur?’

He had the impression that every now and again their mother came and looked through the gap in the door. He was embarrassed, as if he’d been caught in the act.

‘Cheers! Will you buy Eva a drink, too? Have something, Eva.’

And so he ended up with the two of them at his table, not knowing what to say, glowering at them. The two girls kept exchanging glances that were a conversation in themselves. Noticing this, Loursat grew ever more uncomfortable.

‘How much do I owe you?’

‘Nine fifty ... Don’t you have change? Did you come by car?’

The driver was sitting where he had left him. He immediately set off.

‘No luck, eh? I did warn you, but you never know. A drink and a laugh, sure, maybe a bit of a grope, okay. But as for the rest ...’

He suddenly became aware that his embarrassment was now mixed with a certain satisfaction at being taken for a man who would travel kilometres out of town in search of a house where he could touch up girls.

He couldn’t have said why he associated this new thought with his sister Marthe. He saw her again, standing there in her pale-green dress, receiving his slap. He’d have liked her to be here ...

‘Do a lot of people go there?’ he asked, leaning forwards to hear the driver’s reply.

‘Regulars who imagine they’ll get lucky one day. Gangs of youngsters who want to raise a ruckus and don’t dare do it in any of the cafés in town.’

There wasn't a single light on now in the new neighbourhood, with its unfinished streets, where Émile Manu lived. At the Boxing Bar, on the other hand, two silhouettes could be made out behind the curtain.

‘Where shall I drop you?’

‘Anywhere ... At the corner of the street.’

Like someone who can't resign himself to seeing a party end, he was prolonging this evening, stopping occasionally to listen to footsteps in the distance.

In his street, passing all the big houses that were similar to his, it struck him that he hated them, them and their occupants, just as he hated his sister, and Dossin, and Rogissart and his wife, and Ducup and the deputy prosecutor, all these people who hadn't done him any harm but were on the other side of the barricade, which would have been his side if his wife hadn't run off with a man named Bernard, if he hadn't spent eighteen years shut up in his study and if he hadn't just discovered a bustling life he'd never thought about, a life superimposed on the other life, the official life of the town, people he'd never suspected, people who were different: a Nicole who stood up to Ducup and sent off notes in all directions, Jo the Boxer who offered him a round, Émile Manu who was ready either to pick a fight or burst into sobs, and even that pallid Edmond Dossin who was going to make things difficult for his vain dandy of a father and his oh-so-distinguished mother, even that bank clerk, the son of a model cashier, whom he didn't yet know and who was foolish enough to think he could hide in Paris, and that Luska who sold shoes in the street outside Prisunic ...

What happened next was that he found he didn't have his key. He rang, knowing perfectly well that the Dwarf would be too scared to come downstairs and that Nicole was probably fast asleep.

On the off-chance, he went to the side alley and found the tradesman's entrance open, as it had been on those other days, and that was how he got home.

It gave him the illusion that in a small way he was part of the group!

That was pretty much how it was: in his bed, his beard quivering like couch grass with each snore, he must have seemed huge, huge and wicked, the Wicked Ogre.

And the Dwarf, who had just tiptoed in and now stood watching him, was the Fairy Godmother doing everything she could to save her Little Princess, taking letters to Rue d'Allier, to Luska, to Destrivaux, to Dossin, a fairy who was surly to everyone else but incomparably good to the girl she had devoted her life to.

Loursat couldn't help smiling. The idea had crossed his mind as Fine scampered to his bed and looked at him curiously.

Could it be that when he was lying like this, motionless and at her mercy, she had occasionally had the desire to take another kind of revenge, not just grimace at him as she so often did?

It was raining, he realized. In addition, he had forgotten to close the shutters in his study the previous evening.

'What is it, Fine?'

'A letter.'

'You woke me up for a letter?'

'A gendarme just brought it, saying it was urgent.'

It was only now that he became aware of how weary the Dwarf seemed, how dejected and discouraged. Neglecting the little war they waged on each other every morning, she was waiting ostentatiously for him to tear open the envelope.

'Is it bad?' she asked when he had done so.

'The prosecutor's asking me to come and see him at the courthouse this morning.'

She must have been surprised to see him immediately climb out of bed, in defiance of the usual ritual, and get dressed in a few minutes.

'Is Mademoiselle up?' he asked as he buttoned his trousers.

‘She went out ages ago.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly eleven. Mademoiselle went out before ten.’

‘Do you have any idea where she went?’

There was a tacit truce between them. Fine did hesitate a little, and there was the usual mistrust in her eyes, but she nevertheless thought it best to reveal all.

‘It was Monsieur Émile’s mother came looking for her.’

‘Émile Manu’s mother?’

‘They arrested him this morning,’ Fine said, harshly, as if it was her master’s fault.

So, while he’d been in bed, bathed in his own sweat, sleeping like a big furry animal ... He looked through the window at the murky sky, the desert of wet cobbles, a milkmaid walking along the street with a sack on her head, an umbrella disappearing round the corner, the stones of the houses covered in patches of dampness.

It was dull weather, sadder than the equally ashen but windy cold of All Saints’. He pictured the new streets over near the cemetery. What was the name of the street again? Rue Ernest-Voivenon! Not even named after a local celebrity, but after the man who owned the land!

People who, while he lay fast asleep, woke early in the morning and ventured out into the wetness, most on bicycles, to go to work in town.

How had the police gone about it? They must have arrived before eight in the morning, to catch Émile Manu before he set off for the bookshop. A man from the Sûreté had probably taken up position on the corner of the street, neighbours peering at him through their curtains.

During that time, Madame Manu had been making breakfast and Émile had been getting dressed ...

As if to deliver a knock-out blow with one crowning reproach, the Dwarf said, looking away:

‘He tried to kill himself.’

‘To kill himself? With what?’

‘A gun.’

‘Is he hurt?’

‘The shot didn’t go off. When he heard the police talking to his mother in the corridor, he ran up to the attic and that’s where he ...’

A fake marble corridor, Loursat was sure of it, with a mat in front of each door, and those louts from the Sûreté taking up too much room and dragging in dirty water with their shoes.

Fine was starting on the bed. Loursat grabbed his overcoat, still damp from the previous night, and his bowler hat. Outside, the biting cold felt like the interior of a cave, and the drops that fell on him were bigger and nastier than those falling from the roofs of the houses.

So Madame Manu's first thought had been to come and see Nicole! To blame her? Probably not! And yet, deep down, as both the boy's mother and Nicole's social inferior, she must hold her responsible for this disaster.

How ashamed she must have felt, walking down her street and across her neighbourhood! She must have wept and talked to herself as she walked, must have begged Nicole to do something.

And the two of them had gone off together to defend Émile, leaving the ogre asleep, to be watched over by the Dwarf.

Now Loursat understood the letter he had received. It wasn't a summons.

Dear friend,

I'm told there's no way to get hold of you on the phone. Could you come urgently to the courthouse?

I'll be waiting.

It was signed by Rogissart, and Loursat noted that he had avoided any friendly formula at the end.

Loursat had no intention of swaggering. He hadn't prepared a particular demeanour. But, as he walked across the concourse, which swarmed with defence lawyers and other colleagues in their robes, he looked, despite himself, like someone who is expected and who has come prepared for a fight. His shoulders stooped, his hands in his pockets, he kept straight on and climbed the stairs to the prosecutor's department.

As his head came level with the landing, he spotted two women sitting on a bench, their backs to the green-painted wall. First, a black skirt and buttoned shoes: Madame Manu, Émile's mother, holding a handkerchief in her hand. Her neighbour was none other than Nicole, who was squeezing that hand with a movement that was more mechanical than affectionate.

Madame Manu wasn't crying, but she had been, and there was already a desperate look in her eyes. Others were also waiting: an old man on the same bench, a lout between gendarmes on a nearby bench.

Loursat hurried up the last few steps, passed the two women without glancing at them and opened Rogissart's door without knocking.

He had avoided a scene in the corridor, which was already something! Inside the office, which was quite dark, two men stood by the window, silhouetted against the light. They turned simultaneously.

'At last!' Rogissart said at once, walking over to his desk and taking his seat.

The other man was Ducup, looking more weaselly than ever. It was noticeable that both men had arranged it so that they weren't close to Loursat, which would have obliged them to shake hands with him.

'Sit down, Hector. I wager I woke you up.'

He couldn't address him other than by his Christian name, given that they were cousins and had spent their childhood together. He immediately made up for it with his second sentence, as well as with his attitude and the way he affected to go through his files, as if dealing with some defendant or other he was trying to impress.

As for Ducup, he remained standing, like a spectator who knows what's coming and is looking forward to it.

'I'm very upset by what's happening, of course. More than upset, to be honest. Let me put my cards on the table – and please keep this to yourself – last night I did something I've never dared do in my career: I telephoned the Ministry to ask for advice!'

This whole town, all these roofs in the rain, trails of water in the corridors of the courthouse, the two women on their bench ... And where was Émile? Waiting under police guard in some sordid corner of this monumental building?

'Of course, I've called you here unofficially. Ducup and I agreed you needed to be involved, at the very least to be kept up to date. Yesterday, Ducup questioned the Dossin boy for a long time, and I was present at part of the interrogation. You know him, since he's your nephew. I admit I felt sorry for the poor lad. I've frequently had occasion to meet him when I've been to dinner at his house. He always struck me as a young man of delicate health, very gentle, with hands and eyes like a girl's. Ducup treated him with a great deal of restraint during the interrogation, but he proved to be

abnormally sensitive and so nervous that I wondered if we might need to call a doctor. He resisted for a long time, but eventually, he talked ...'

Loursat's reaction was quite unexpected, at least to his two companions, who looked at him in astonishment, momentarily struck dumb: he stood up, took off his overcoat, went and hung it in a cupboard he knew, took some cigarettes from his pocket, came back, sat down and finally rested a notebook on his lap and brandished a propelling pencil in his right hand.

'Do you mind?'

They exchanged worried glances, wondering if they should see a threat in this new attitude of his.

'I assume you will guess the answer I have for you. It's something that everyone will know about in a few hours. It's impossible to keep a case like this quiet – there is a dead man after all. The Ministry agree with me. In this tragic business, Edmond Dossin was merely a bystander and, up to a point, a victim. I can easily understand that, having had a chance to appreciate how impressionable he is. He's part of a small group that's been frequenting a little bar near the market, some of them well-to-do young people, but others too, the son of a pork butcher, the son of a—'

'I know!' Loursat cut in.

'In that case, you also know that your daughter was in a way the centre of the group, and that your house was its headquarters. I'm sorry about that, not only for you, but for all of us, because the scandal will redound on the good society of Moulins. It's going to be difficult in court to convince the jury that a whole group of young people could gather in a house at night, dance to gramophone records and get drunk without the master of this house ...'

Ducup, who was playing the part of the public, nodded.

'Things would probably not have gone any further if, less than three weeks ago now, a newcomer hadn't joined the group, a fellow named Manu, who, on his very first evening, suggested they steal a car – borrow it, if you prefer – in order to continue their party at a certain country inn. In this regard, I'll only observe that Edmond Dossin behaved very well, since it was he who volunteered to fetch Dr Matray, demanding professional confidentiality of him.'

The strange thing was that this account brought back certain childhood memories to Loursat, certain facial expressions and attitudes that belonged

to his sister Marthe. He thought he could still hear her say, when their parents discovered something bad:

‘It was Hector!’

She was already sickly in those days, and so nervous – like her son now – that nobody dared upset her. Which didn’t stop her throwing her brother a look that proclaimed:

‘I fooled them again, didn’t I? You’re done for!’

Rogissart, who had assumed a measured expression, continued:

‘I’ve been obliged to examine a certain aspect of the matter that’s sure to be mentioned in public. I needed to find out the exact nature of the relationship between Dossin and Nicole. I’m convinced that Edmond is telling the truth and that there’s never been anything between them. It amused them to act in front of both friends and strangers as if they were lovers, but it was only a game ... Please forgive me for touching on this subject ... I don’t think the same could be said of this fellow Manu. As far as he was concerned, the presence of the injured man in your house gave him an excellent excuse to go back there every evening. And I have every reason to believe that the man had some influence on this young fellow.

‘My opinion is clear. I think you’ll grant me some experience in criminal matters. Manu belongs to that race of fanatical young people who can end up either as saints or as jailbirds, in the sense that they’re impressionable, ready to respond to any impulse they’re given. Where the others were playing more or less innocently, he brought a dangerous realism to the game. Dossin didn’t say this in so many words, but it’s what emerged from the things he did say. The group’s get-togethers took on a new character, and they even started to envisage expeditions that had no goal other than robbery pure and simple.

‘Let’s say the main fault lies with this Big Louis, about whom I keep receiving the worst kind of information. In this respect, you may be interested to know that, during the two weeks he spent under your roof, Big Louis sent several money orders, totalling two thousand six hundred francs, to a country girl who’s had three children with him and who lives in a village in Normandy. We were able to trace these money orders. I’ve sent a letter of request to Honfleur, asking for this woman to be questioned and, if need be, I’ll issue a summons. This leads us, alas, to what I think is the truth, and Ducup, who has followed this case with an integrity and tact for which I thank him—’

Loursat coughed. That was all. He coughed, then continued the drawing he had started absent-mindedly on a page of his notebook.

‘This Manu, impressed by Big Louis, manipulated by him, must have committed a number of indiscretions, because, according to Dossin, the two thousand six hundred francs could only have come from him. Did he eventually become scared? Did Big Louis grow more demanding? Whatever the reason, he made up his mind to eliminate him.’

As if Loursat didn’t already know, he added, somewhat gravely:

‘I had him apprehended this morning. He’s here. In a few minutes, I plan to interrogate him.’

Rogissart got to his feet, went to the window and looked out.

‘What’s extremely regrettable is that your daughter decided she needed to come running straight here in the company of the boy’s mother. They’re both in the corridor. You must have seen them. Ducup tried to intervene with Nicole, discreetly, to ask her not to show herself off like this, but he didn’t get any response. In these conditions, if I do end up charging Manu, it’ll be hard to understand—’

Loursat looked up.

‘Why you aren’t arresting my daughter?’ he asked in an astonishingly calm voice.

‘We’re certainly not at that point yet. Nevertheless, I sent for you. I wanted to talk to you, to bring you up to date. Your position in our town is quite special. We respect you, because we all know how painfully certain misfortunes have affected you. We forgive you your eccentricities and ...’

These words suddenly reminded Loursat that he hadn’t yet had a drink this morning.

‘I don’t need to go into details. All the same, it would probably have been better if Nicole had had a different kind of upbringing, if proper supervision had made her a young lady like any other and—’

Loursat coughed again. Rogissart and Ducup looked at each other, almost anxiously. They had probably expected to see a pathetic figure begging for help, or else a wild drunk they could easily have got the better of.

‘Do you have any evidence against Émile Manu?’

‘Grave suspicions, at the very least. He was in your house on the night of the murder. Your daughter admits that. She almost boasted about it, making it clear he’d spent part of the evening in her room.’

Since he wasn't letting himself be overawed by them, they were going to speak to him more crudely.

'Is it finally getting through to you?'

'I'd be happy to be present when you question Émile Manu.'

'Are you planning to take on his defence?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Listen, Hector ...'

He made a sign to Ducup, who left the room with an overly casual air. Rogissart approached Loursat and spoke in a low voice.

'You and I are relatives. My wife is very upset by this business. Your sister Marthe phoned me this morning. Edmond has taken to his bed. We're very worried about him. He seems to be suffering from a serious depression. Charles came back from Paris this morning and also phoned me. Needless to say, he's really angry with you ... Everything nearly sorted itself out this morning. When they went to apprehend Manu, he took refuge in the attic and tried to kill himself. But either the gun jammed, or in his excitement he forgot to remove the safety catch. Or else he was play-acting, which isn't impossible. All the same, if it had happened, it would have been easier to close the file on this case. There's no doubt he's guilty, especially after making that gesture, which rather gives the game away. But what if, as revenge, he drags your daughter, Edmond and all their friends down with him? I'm sure you'll agree that the whole town, your relatives and your friends, have respected your desire for solitude as long as you wanted and have kept silent about your habits and your eccentricities. But today, the situation is serious, almost tragic.'

Loursat lit a cigarette and said:

'Shall we get Manu in here?'

All the same, he was nervous. Not in the sense that the others might suppose, though. The analogy would have astonished them, but his nervousness resembled that of a man on his first date.

He was waiting for Manu! He couldn't wait to see him again! He envied the Dwarf, who had run around town the previous day, distributing Nicole's notes! He envied his daughter, sitting on that bench, surrounded by gendarmes and thieves, next to Manu's tearful mother, calmly defying the curiosity and pity of all those who were deliberately passing that way to stare at her.

Something huge, unexpected and overwhelming had happened to him! He had emerged from his lair! He had descended into the street, into the town!

He had looked at Nicole at the dining table, Nicole who, in the absence of a maid, had occasionally stood up, gone to fetch the dishes from the hatch and placed them on the tablecloth without a word.

He had looked at Manu ... He had listened to Jo the Boxer ... He had gone all the way to that strange inn, with the two girls whose mother had stood in a dressing gown, watching through the gap in the door ...

He wanted to ...

It was terribly hard to say, or even to formulate it as a thought, especially as he wasn't used to it and was scared of a degree of ridicule. He didn't dare say 'wanted to live'. But 'wanted to fight'? It was almost that. To shake himself, shake off the straw from his pigsty, shake off the dubious smells that still clung to his skin, the sourness of his ego which had stewed for too long within book-lined walls.

And to charge ahead ...

To say to Nicole later, quite naturally, almost casually, as he sat down opposite her at the dining table:

'Don't worry!'

And to make her see that he was like them, that he was with them and not the others, that he was with his daughter, with the Dwarf, with Émile and his piano-teaching mother!

He hadn't been drinking! He was heavy, but he was solid, in control. He was looking at the door. He was in a hurry. He listened for the sounds, caught the footsteps of the policemen in the long corridor, Madame Manu's stifled cry, her tears, the struggle as she tried to throw herself into her son's arms and he pushed her away.

The door at last ... The sharp features of a plain-clothes policeman who looked questioningly at the prosecutor, waiting for a sign, and when it came admitted the young man ...

The measured voice of Rogissart, who went to Lourdes and Rome on pilgrimages every year in the hope of finally having a child!

'The examining magistrate is going to ask you a few questions, but your answers won't be recorded, because this isn't an official interrogation. You can therefore speak quite openly, and I would strongly advise you to do so.'

Why had the boy seen Loursat before anyone else? It was Loursat his excessively mobile eyes had searched for as he entered this room with its one official light.

Loursat had recoiled, embarrassed, hurt. Hurt, yes, because he had felt that he was the one Émile resented, he was the one the young man blamed for everything. Worse than that, he seemed to be saying:

‘I went to you in all honesty. I wept in front of you. I told you all the things I felt badly about. And now I find you here! It’s you who had me arrested me, you who ...’

They left him standing. He wasn’t very tall, and there was mud on his right knee. His hands were shaking, despite his efforts to remain calm.

Loursat envied him, not so much for being eighteen as for being capable of such total despair and for being here, feeling dizzy, feeling the world topple around him, but knowing that his mother was in tears, that Nicole was waiting and would never desert him, that the Dwarf had adopted him, the only person outside her exclusive love for Nicole.

He was loved, loved absolutely, unreservedly! They could harass him, sentence him, execute him, but there would always be three women who believed in him!

What could he be feeling? He had to steel himself to stop looking at Loursat and look instead at Ducup, who had sat down at the desk while Rogissart walked up and down the room.

‘As the prosecutor has just been kind enough to tell you—’

‘I didn’t kill Big Louis!’

It had gushed out like oil from a well, dark and compelling.

‘Please don’t interrupt me! As the prosecutor has just been kind enough to tell you, this is not so much an interrogation as a private interview which —’

‘I didn’t kill him!’

He was holding on to the green-leather-topped mahogany desk. Was he feeling unsteady on his feet? He alone saw that office, that pale window, in a light that the others didn’t know, would never know.

‘I don’t want to go to prison! I ...’

He swung round and looked at Loursat, the impulse strong inside him to throw himself on the man.

‘It was him, wasn’t it? He was the one who said—’

‘Please calm down.’

The prosecutor had placed a hand on his shoulder. Loursat, in the meantime, had bowed his head, racked with genuine sorrow, a vague sense of shame, the shame of being himself, of having been unable to inspire confidence in this young man.

Or in Nicole! Or Fine! Or doubtless the mother he had passed earlier! He was the enemy!

‘It was I who asked Monsieur Loursat to be present at this interview, given the very special position in which he finds himself. I don’t suppose you’re aware of that. You’re young and impulsive. You acted without thinking, and unfortunately—’

‘Do you think I killed Big Louis?’

He was shaking even more now, not from fear, Loursat sensed that, but from a terrible anguish, the anguish of being misunderstood, of being alone against everyone, surrounded, oppressed by everyone, subjected to the insidious attacks of these two magistrates, and faced with Loursat, who seemed to him like a big, malevolent beast huddled in his corner.

‘It isn’t true! I stole, yes, but so did the others!’

He was crying without tears, with only grimaces, his distorted features changing so rapidly that it was painful to watch.

‘You have no right to arrest only me. I didn’t kill him. Do you hear? I didn’t kill him!’

‘Shhh! Don’t raise your voice.’

The prosecutor was worried: they must be able to hear Manu from the corridor, in spite of the padded door.

‘When they took me from my house, they put handcuffs on me, as if I was—’

Unexpectedly, Ducup hit the desk with a paper knife and said mechanically:

‘Be quiet!’

It was so unexpected that Manu, taken aback, fell silent and looked at Ducup in comical amazement.

‘You’re here to answer questions, not to indulge in an indecent scene. I see I’m obliged to remind you of the need for propriety.’

Émile was swaying, unsteady on his thin legs, sweat on his lips and temples. His neck, seen from behind, looked like a chicken’s.

‘You don’t deny having borrowed – to put it kindly – a car to take your friends to the country. It was the deputy mayor’s car, and, either through

your lack of experience or your state of intoxication, you caused an accident.'

Frowning deeply, Émile stared, not understanding. The words barely reached him, or rather, only as meaningless sounds. He was long past thinking about the car! The sentences were too long, Ducup too calm, too stiff, too circumspect.

'It's worth noting that up until that day, or more precisely that night, those who were about to become your friends had never come to anyone's attention and had never been in any trouble.'

Once again, Émile turned and looked straight at Loursat, who was in the half-light, near the Empire fireplace. He still didn't understand. He was wading through some soft substance, searching for something to hold on to. His eyes asked Loursat:

'What new nonsense is this?'

'Please look at me and answer my questions. How long have you worked in the Georges bookshop as an assistant?'

'A year!'

'And before that?'

'I was at school.'

'Hold on a minute! Didn't you work for a time in an estate agency in Rue Gambetta?'

This time, he looked at them furiously and cried:

'Yes!'

'Do you mind telling us the circumstances in which you left that agency?'

He stiffened all over, defiantly.

'I was fired! That's right! I was fired by Monsieur Goldstein, who paid me two hundred francs a month provided I run errands on my own bicycle, just because there was a difference of twelve francs in the petty cash.'

'That's more or less correct. The petty cash was the money Monsieur Goldstein let you have for stamps, registered mail and general small office expenses. For a while, he patiently watched you, noting everything you posted, everything you spent, however small. That's how he caught you with your hand in the till. You were cheating on stamps and on transport.'

The ensuing silence was quite long and heavy. Rain was falling. The silence out in the corridor, beyond the door, was even more impressive than that inside the office.

Rogissart signalled to Ducup not to bother too much with unimportant details.

But it was already too late. Ducup insisted in his shrill voice:

‘What do you have to say to that?’

Silence.

‘I assume you admit it?’

You could almost see the sigh rise from his chest. At the same time, Manu rose to his full height, looked slowly around him and said clearly:

‘I’m not saying anything more!’

His eyes came to rest on Loursat, and there was a slight hesitation, a doubt, perhaps because the lawyer’s glowering eyes appeared even murkier than usual.

Half an hour later, the rumour was circulating through the courthouse that Loursat had agreed to defend Émile Manu. He was still in the prosecutor's office. The door of this office had remained shut, except for a brief while when Rogissart, who had promised to telephone his wife at eleven thirty and was unable to do so from his office, rushed to another office nearby.

'He almost begged the boy to accept him as his counsel!' the tall, thin prosecutor said to his tall, thin wife over the phone.

He was exaggerating. The truth was that it had happened in quite a stupid way, for which more or less everyone was responsible. Rogissart and Ducup had felt embarrassed by this wild young man who was refusing to answer any more of their questions. They had conferred in low voices, standing by the window. When Ducup had returned to his desk, he had coughed and declared:

'I must inform you that the law allows you, as of now, to call upon the services of a lawyer and to request his presence at interrogations.'

Quite naturally, at the word 'lawyer', Manu had looked at Loursat. A simple association of ideas. Yet Loursat had very nearly blushed. Would he have been able to hide his feelings from a man his age? Perhaps, but not from a child, precisely because the feeling that took hold of him at that moment was as naive and intense as that of a child.

He was longing to represent Émile, and he was so sure that longing was reflected in his eyes that he turned his head away.

Manu didn't trust him. And just because he didn't trust him ...

The other two, Rogissart and Ducup, didn't understand, because it wasn't the reaction of an adult, but Loursat thought he did understand, because he wanted to understand.

Émile didn't trust him. He was thinking:

'Maybe it's because of him that I'm here. He resents me for compromising his family. He's related to all these people.'

But, turning to search out Loursat's eyes, he said:

'I choose Monsieur Loursat!'

That meant:

'You see, I'm not scared! I have nothing to hide! I don't yet know if you're my enemy or not. But now that I'm placing myself in your hands, of my own free will, you won't dare betray me again.'

Rogissart and Ducup looked at each other, and Ducup scratched his sharp nose with the tip of his pen.

As for Loursat, he said simply:

'I accept. Gentlemen, I think that in this case it is only right, after a formal establishing of identity, that I be given time to study the file. Shall we postpone the in-depth interrogation until tomorrow morning?'

They brought the court clerk in.

By the time Loursat left, Nicole and Madame Manu had already heard the news. They stood up simultaneously. Nicole looked at her father with a degree of curiosity, no more than that. She didn't yet understand. She preferred to wait.

As for Madame Manu, she couldn't have been expected to be quite as calm.

The three of them crossed the concourse together, Loursat in the middle, examining everyone around him with a strange expression on his face. Some had waited deliberately in order to cross their path.

Madame Manu's eyes were red, and she held a rolled-up handkerchief in her hand. Like all those not in the know, she kept asking questions.

'If they haven't charged him yet, why are they keeping him? They can't possibly put him in prison when there's no evidence against him! It was the others, Monsieur Loursat. I know him, and I can assure you, it was the others who dragged him into it.'

Some smiled. To a lawyer, the sight of a colleague grappling with his client is always a tiny bit ridiculous. That's why such public scenes are avoided as much as possible.

But Loursat remained there, as if enjoying it. Madame Manu, too, was a little ridiculous, ridiculous and pathetic, thoroughly small-minded yet with moments when she came close to being a tragic figure.

'Up until lately, he was a boy who never went out. In fact, I'm the one who's responsible for what's happening now. I kept saying to him, "Émile, you shouldn't shut yourself up in your room like this after work. You read

too much. You'd do better to get some fresh air, mix with friends your own age." I'd have liked it, you know, if a few of them had come to the house in the evening and played games.'

Every now and again, emotional as she was, she looked at Loursat in a very lucid way: despite everything, she mistrusted him as much as she probably mistrusted everyone, even her son.

'He started going out with Luska, and I didn't like that too much. Then he'd come home later and later, and his character changed. I didn't know where he went. Some nights, he hardly had three hours' sleep.'

Was Loursat listening? He looked at Nicole, who was waiting with some impatience, then at the thin face of Manu's mother, who every once in a while felt obliged to sniff.

'The main thing is, if it's going to help him, don't worry about the expense. We aren't rich – I have my husband's mother dependent on me – but, in a case like this, I'd rather eat dry bread for the rest of my days.'

A young trainee lawyer who was an occasional correspondent for a Paris newspaper had run out, still in his robe, to fetch a photographer who lived opposite the courthouse. Now the two of them appeared, the photographer carrying a bulky camera like those used for weddings and banquets.

'May we?'

Madame Manu assumed a dignified air. Loursat didn't turn a hair. When it was over, he said to Nicole:

'You ought to see Madame Manu home. It's raining more heavily now. Take a taxi.'

By now he was almost with them, but they hadn't accepted him yet. This became especially clear at lunchtime, when the Dwarf came upstairs to serve the meal in person. The new maid who had shown up that morning hadn't been suitable, at least according to Fine.

Fine was in such a hurry to know everything that she questioned Nicole even as she served. She clearly didn't trust Loursat. It was perhaps even worse than mistrust. She was ignoring him, challenging him to do something harmful!

'What did he say?'

'He didn't say anything, Fine. I hardly saw him. He's chosen my father as his lawyer.'

Loursat ate, his bottle of wine next to him as usual. He would have liked to join in the conversation, but he still felt awkward. Nevertheless, he announced:

‘I’m going to the prison this afternoon to see him. If you have anything you want me to tell him, Nicole ...’

‘No ... Or rather, yes. Tell him the police searched his house but didn’t find anything.’

It was the Dwarf who was the most surprised, and she started prowling around Loursat like a dog around a new master.

‘When are you meant to be seeing him?’ Nicole asked.

‘At three.’

‘Couldn’t I see him too?’

‘Not today. Tomorrow, I’ll submit a request to Ducup.’

All this was still hesitant and uncomfortable.

Much more than the words, it was a fact, so small it even escaped Fine, that revealed what had changed in the house.

Loursat had drunk about half his bottle. Usually, by this time, he had already drunk a whole one and was just finishing the one that had been placed on the table for him. As he was about to pour himself a drink, Nicole looked at him. He felt her eyes on him and guessed what that meant. For a moment, his hand hung in mid-air, holding the bottle. In the end, he poured from it, but barely a half-finger of wine, as if out of a sense of propriety.

Soon afterwards, he went to his study, where he hadn’t had time that morning to leave some Burgundy to warm to room temperature.

More cold and damp, the prison courtyard, the corridors, the guard smoking a long, foul-smelling pipe.

‘Hello, Thomas.’

‘Hello, Monsieur Loursat. Haven’t seen you around here in a while. It’s for the young fellow, isn’t it? Do you want to see him in the visiting room or in his cell? He hasn’t said a word since he’s been here and he’s refusing to eat.’

In the town, because of the weather, the street lamps and the lights in the shop windows were already lit. Loursat, his leather briefcase in his hand, followed Thomas, who opened a door for him, No. 17, and announced:

‘Wait, I’ll get rid of this one first.’

Because Manu wasn't alone in his cell. As soon as he saw the cell mate he had been assigned, Loursat frowned. He was quite obviously a regular of the place, a gangling lout who must have been given the job of grilling the newcomer.

Manu was sitting in his corner. When he found himself alone with Loursat, he merely raised his head a little and looked at him. The silence continued, all the more impressive in that, although they were in the middle of the town, they didn't feel any vibrations. What broke the silence was Loursat striking a match to light his cigarette.

'Would you like one?'

A shake of the head. Then a moment later Émile held out his hand and said in an unsteady voice:

'Thanks!'

They were embarrassed by their solitude, and of the two Loursat was the more awkward. At last he asked, to break the spell:

'Why did you try to kill yourself?'

'Because I didn't want to go to prison!'

'Now that you're here, you can see it's not as bad as people imagine. Not that you'll be here long anyway. Who killed Big Louis?'

He had gone much too fast. Émile raised his head so abruptly, it looked as if he was about to leap on him.

'Why are you asking me that? You think I know, don't you? Or maybe you also think it was me?'

'I'm convinced it wasn't you, and I hope to prove it. Unfortunately, I can't do anything unless you help me.'

What impressed him wasn't so much the circumstances of the two of them in this badly lit cell. It was rather the awareness that it was less out of professional duty that he was asking his questions than out of curiosity.

Even then, it wasn't an ordinary, impersonal curiosity.

He wanted to know in order to get closer to the group, to become part of it. Not that the group meant anything! It was merely an order of things, a life within life, almost a town within the town, a certain way of thinking and feeling, a tiny handful of humans who, as some planets do in the sky, followed their own mysterious orbit heedless of the great universal order.

Precisely because someone like Manu or Nicole was outside the rules, it was hard to tame them. However much he rolled his big watery eyes and went round in circles like a bear, or rather like a bearded seal ...

‘Can you tell me how you first found out about the group?’

‘Through Luska, I already told you!’

He was clearly more positive than he seemed: he hadn’t forgotten the confidences he had made at moments when he might have lost his composure!

‘Were you presented with rules, passwords, that kind of thing?’

Loursat was trying to recall his childhood and was obliged to go back further than the age Émile was now: by the age of eighteen he was already a loner.

‘There were regulations.’

‘Written ones?’

‘Yes. Edmond Dossin kept them in his wallet. He must have burned them.’

‘Why?’

No doubt finding the question absurd, Manu shrugged. As for Loursat, he wasn’t discouraged. In fact, he thought they were making progress. Again, he held out his cigarette case.

‘I assume it was Dossin who drew up these regulations?’

‘I wasn’t told that, but it’s in his nature.’

‘What’s in his nature? To set up groups?’

‘To make things complicated! To make paperwork! He forced me to sign a paper for Nicole.’

This was becoming infinitely delicate. One word out of place and Manu would clam up again. Loursat didn’t dare push him. He made an effort at humour:

‘Like a contract?’

‘He sold her to me,’ Manu said, staring at the concrete floor. ‘I don’t think you’d understand. It was a rule. According to the regulations, no member could take another member’s woman without his consent and without compensation.’

He blushed, suddenly realizing how monstrous that must seem. And yet it was the simple truth!

‘How much did you pay for her?’

‘I had to pay fifty francs a month for a year.’

‘To Edmond? Had he been the previous owner?’

‘That’s what he made everyone think, but I could see there had never been anything between them.’

‘I assume my nephew Edmond burned that paper too? So far, I get the impression he was the leader.’

‘He *was* the leader!’

‘So this wasn’t just a matter of friends getting together, it was a genuine organization. Did it have a name?’

‘The Boxing Bar gang!’

‘But Jo the Boxer wasn’t part of it?’

‘No. He knew the regulations, but he didn’t want to get involved with us, because of his licence.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘If he’d got caught, they’d have taken away his licence, because he’s an old lag.’

Loursat didn’t smile at this unexpected expression. Outside, night must have fallen by now. Occasionally, the guard’s regular footsteps could be heard from the corridor.

‘Were there particular days when you all met?’

‘As a rule, we met at the Boxing Bar every evening, but it wasn’t obligatory. It was only on Saturdays that everyone was supposed to be there and bring their—’

He broke off.

‘Bring their ...?’

‘If I tell you everything, are you bound by confidentiality?’

‘I can’t reveal anything without your permission.’

‘Then give me another cigarette. They took them from me at the clerk’s office, along with everything I had in my pockets, my shoelaces and ...’

He was on the verge of tears. A moment before, he had been asking a specific question, and now seeing his shoes without laces and passing his hand over his open shirt collar brought a sob to his throat.

‘Be a man, Manu!’ Loursat said, almost without irony. ‘You were saying that every week all the members had to bring along ...’

‘Something they’d stolen! There! I don’t want to lie. I knew when I got Luska to introduce me that there was an obligation like that.’

‘How did you know?’

‘I’d heard.’

‘From whom?’

‘Almost every young person in town knew about it. Not in detail. But people were talking about the gang.’

‘Did they make you take an oath?’

‘Yes, in writing.’

‘And I assume you had to pass some kind of test?’

‘It was the car. If I hadn’t known how to drive, I’d have had to break into an empty house, stay for an hour and come back with some object or other.’

‘Anything at all?’

‘Preferably something bulky and hard to carry. It was a kind of contest. The simplest thing was to steal from market stalls. Luska managed once to steal a pumpkin that must have weighed about ten kilos.’

‘And what did you do with all this loot?’

Émile said nothing, just frowned.

‘I suppose it’s all in my house?’

‘Yes, in the attic!’

‘Before you belonged to the gang, had this been going on for a long time?’

‘Maybe two months. Not quite that long. I think Edmond learned the game on holiday in Aix-les-Bains, where a few people had been doing the same thing.’

Loursat had been wondering how Nicole and her cousin Edmond had got to know each other so well, when in fact it was quite simple! True, this ignorance of his dated from the already distant time – had it been three whole days? – when he had still been living in his lair!

His sister Marthe had written to tell him that she had rented a villa in Aix-les-Bains and to ask him if he’d like to send Nicole to stay with her.

Nicole had gone there for a month, and he hadn’t worried any more about her when she was away than when she was at home.

So that was the game the young men and women of good family in Aix-les-Bains had indulged in, while their parents frequented the spa and the casino!

‘Did Edmond bring lots of objects?’

‘Once he brought a silver coffee pot from the Brasserie Gambetta. Another time, there was an argument because Destrivaux claimed he was bringing things from home for fear of committing real thefts. But when Big Louis mentioned the police, admitting he was on bad terms with the law and didn’t want to be get caught again, it was Edmond who boasted about all the things we’d been doing.’

‘This happened in the little room on the second floor?’

‘Yes. He was trying to act clever. That’s the way he is. I’m convinced it’s because of him that Big Louis demanded money. He claimed that because of the accident, in other words, because of us, he couldn’t work, and his wife was waiting for his money orders. First he asked for a thousand francs for the next day.’

‘Did you all club together?’

‘No, the others just dropped me in it.’

‘Who found the thousand francs?’

‘I did.’

He didn’t cry, but turned towards the wall, then saw fit to look Loursat defiantly in the face.

‘What else could I do? Everyone told me it was my fault, I shouldn’t have boasted that I could drive. But thanks to Big Louis, I was able to go and see Nicole every evening ... I have to tell you everything, don’t I? You’re my lawyer. It’s what you wanted! Oh, yes, I could sense it. I don’t yet know why you acted like that, but you wanted it! Well, too bad. If I’d been able to run away somewhere with Nicole ...’

‘And what about her, what did she say?’

‘She didn’t say anything.’

‘Where did you find the thousand francs?’

‘At home. My mother doesn’t know yet. I was planning to put it back eventually. I knew the place where the money was kept, under the linen in the chest of drawers, in an old wallet of my father’s.’

‘And the rest of the amount?’

‘What amount?’

‘The two thousand six hundred francs.’

‘Who told you?’

‘Unfortunately, it’s in the file. The police found the money orders Big Louis sent his lady friend.’

‘What’s there to prove it was me?’

‘It’s just a supposition.’

‘Luska lent me four hundred francs. For the rest ... Well, you’ll find out soon enough anyway, because he’s going to do his accounts. I didn’t know what to do. Big Louis was threatening me, claiming he preferred to admit everything to the police and get us sent to jail. Do you know Monsieur Testut?’

‘The man who lives on Place d’Armes, who has a private income?’

‘Yes. He’s a customer. He buys lots of books, particularly expensive books we order specially for him from Paris. He came into the shop one day when Monsieur Georges had gone upstairs to have his tea – he always has tea at four o’clock. Monsieur Testut paid his bill. One thousand three hundred and thirty-two francs. I kept it. I was planning to give it back by the end of the month.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know. I’d have found a way. Things couldn’t have gone on like that. I swear to you I’m not a thief! Besides, I’d let Edmond know.’

‘About what?’

‘I told him I didn’t want to keep being the scapegoat. The others had to help me. If they hadn’t got me drunk on the day of the accident ...’

A distant car horn pierced the layer of silence, reminding them that all around there was a little town, every inhabitant of which thought they knew everything about it.

Why, at that precise moment, did Loursat think of the Courthouse Club? It had no connection with anything! A few years earlier – it was the time when contract bridge was starting to be played throughout the provinces – magistrates and lawyers had decided to start a social club, which was lacking in the town.

For weeks, all the leading figures in Moulins had been sent circulars and invitations. A provisional committee had been established, with Ducup as the secretary.

Then a permanent committee had been elected, presided over by Rogissart and a general – why a general? – and the club had bought a corner building on Avenue Victor-Hugo.

Loursat had discovered his name on the list of members – not because he had agreed to anything at all, but because all the leading figures were automatically put on it. He had received sumptuously produced reports.

Despite his isolation, he had heard rumours of the arguments that had arisen whenever it came to admitting new members. Some wanted a very exclusive club, comprising only the cream of Moulins. Others, thinking of swelling the budget, suggested they should be more democratic in whom they allowed in.

The magistrates had fought with the board for the important posts, and three meetings had been devoted to the case of a doctor who practised plastic surgery, whom some wanted to admit, others to reject.

Ducup, still the secretary, had followed Rogissart when the latter, along with a good half of the club, had resigned in the course of a stormy meeting.

Nothing more had been heard for weeks, until the day suppliers asked for payment and it had emerged that the manager had signed some strange purchase orders ...

The case had come close to ending up in court, and it had even been necessary to ask each member to donate money – not everyone had agreed to that.

‘Tell me, Manu ...’

He had been on the verge of saying ‘Émile’.

‘I need to know all the members of your gang, as you call it ... By the way, did Big Louis ever mention that a friend or associate of his was planning to pay him a visit?’

‘No.’

‘Or that his mistress might come to Moulins to see him?’

‘No.’

‘Between all of you, was there ever any discussion about trying to get rid of him?’

‘Yes.’

The guard knocked at the door and half opened it.

‘A note for you, maître. A messenger just brought it from the prosecutor’s department.’

Loursat tore open the envelope and read the typewritten note:

The public prosecutor has the honour to inform Maître Loursat that Jean Destrivaux has been missing from his parents’ house since yesterday evening.

There were still so many scattered fragments! And, on top of that, for eighteen years Loursat had unlearned what people’s lives were like!

He had a sense of it, though. It seemed to him that one more effort and he would pull together all these ... all these ...

‘Destrivaux,’ he said out loud.

‘What?’

‘What do you think of Destrivaux?’

‘He’s a neighbour. His parents built a house in our street.’

‘How did he get on with the gang?’

‘It’s hard to explain. He wore glasses. He was always trying to be cleverer than the others, more objective, as he put it. He was pale, quiet ...’

‘I’ve just heard from the prosecutor’s department that he’s gone missing.’

Manu thought this over, and it was curious to see this big child knitting his brows like a man.

‘No!’ he said at last.

‘What do you mean, no?’

‘I don’t think it was him ... He stole cigarette lighters.’

Loursat was getting tired from the constant effort he was having to make: it was indispensable to translate every sentence into plain language, as if it was a text in shorthand or a message in code.

‘I don’t understand,’ he admitted.

‘He was the most comfortably off. He’d buy cigarettes in a tobacconist’s where there were lighters on the counter. Then he’d arrange it so that he dropped some of the lighters on the floor. He’d apologize and pick them up, and as he did he’d put one in his pocket.’

‘Tell me, Manu ...’

Once again, he had almost said ‘Émile’ and almost asked a question it was better not to ask. He had wanted to say:

‘What was your motivation in stealing like that?’

But no, that was stupid! He understood without understanding, struggling amid his intuitions and his contradictions.

‘All the same, one of you ...’

‘Yes!’

‘Who?’

Silence. Manu was still looking at the floor.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Dossin?’

‘I don’t think so. Or else ...’

‘Else what?’

‘Or else he might have been scared.’

For the first time that day, Loursat was feeling the effects of not having had any wine. He was tired. He was limp.

‘You’ll probably be taken to the courthouse at nine tomorrow morning. I’ll try to see you before the interrogation. If not, I’ll be present anyway. Don’t answer too quickly. If need be, don’t hesitate to ask me for advice. I think it’s indispensable to tell the truth about the thefts.’

He realized that Manu was disappointed, and so was he, without knowing exactly why. He had probably been trying to go too fast, thinking he could gain immediate entrance to this world he was only just starting to discover.

As for Émile, he hadn't been told anything specific. Once the door closed, he found himself as adrift as before.

But then the door opened again immediately. It was Loursat.

'I was forgetting! I'll see to it right away that your cell mate is changed. He's a stool pigeon. But don't trust whoever they put in his place either.'

Was it because there was an age difference of nearly thirty years between them? The connection hadn't been established. Going out through the main gate into the rain, his briefcase against his left side, Loursat looked at the street lamps, the reflections, the busier street beyond the next crossroads.

On the right, there was a small bistro from where some prisoners had their meals brought in. He went in.

'Red wine.'

It was about time. He was out of his depth, almost missing his study and his deep solitude.

The owner, who was wearing a pullover, watched him drink his wine and finally asked:

'Do you think there'll be lots of them caught up in it? Is it right that most of these rich young people were part of it?'

So the whole town knew!

'Same again!'

The purplish-blue wine was thick and rough.

Loursat paid. For a first time in contact with people, he had been out for too long. Do convalescents on their first day out walk from morning to night?

Once outside, though, he hesitated to go back to the courthouse. No particular reason: he just wanted to breathe the air of the other side.



Part Two

Loursat raised his head, gave his daughter a furtive glance, left his armchair and went and poked the stove, which had been roaring whenever there was a sudden gust of wind. He sensed that Nicole, calmly bent over her files, was watching him without needing to move her eyes – it was as if she held him at the end of a thread – but he nevertheless headed over to a cupboard, opened it and took out a bottle of rum.

‘Aren’t you cold, my dear?’ he asked awkwardly.

She answered no, her tone a mixture of reproach and indulgence. Several times, he had put the bottle back without drinking. This time, he merely let out a genuinely weary sigh.

‘It’s the last night! Tomorrow ...’

It was after midnight. The town was deserted, the sky clear, with a brutal clarity, the streets swept by a wind that raised a fine dust of ice from the cobbles.

The shutters in the study hadn’t been closed. In the whole street, the whole neighbourhood, the Loursats’ window was the only small patch of life.

They were nearing the end of the tunnel, a tunnel they’d been in for three months. Already by the morning of 1 January, the heavy layer of dampness that had crushed the town had disappeared, and they had stopped living in stickiness, furtively hugging the dripping buildings, in a world of black on white, as faded as an etching.

The nights were so long that you forgot the days, once again saw nothing but dimly lit shops, steamed-up windows and streets shrouded in darkness, where every passer-by became a mystery.

‘How many have you done so far?’ Loursat asked, sitting down again and looking for a cigarette.

‘Sixty-three!’ she said.

‘Aren’t you tired?’

She shook her head. Sixty-three files out of ninety-seven! Ninety-seven folders of thick paper arranged in piles on the desk, some full to bursting, others flat, sometimes containing nothing but a single sheet of paper.

Above the fireplace, a big, black figure 12 on the pale sheet of the calendar: Sunday 12 January. And as it was after midnight, it was already Monday 13, in other words, *the day*.

To other people, it might mean nothing. For Loursat, for Nicole, for the Dwarf, for the maid, for some people in the town and elsewhere, Monday 13 was the end of the tunnel. At eight o'clock in the morning, an unaccustomed group of volunteer stewards would take up position on the steps of the courthouse and demand to see tickets, which had been distributed only sparingly. The police van would bring Émile Manu, who had grown thinner but taller and would be wearing the new suit his mother had had made for him the previous week. And in the cloakroom, Loursat would put on his robe, which Nicole had persuaded him to let her send for a thorough cleaning.

'Wasn't Pijollet interrogated twice?' she said, frowning in surprise.

Who even knew who Pijollet was? They did! They and a few others who, after spending so much time on the case, could have been using a hermetic language among themselves.

'There was one interrogation on the 12th of December,' Loursat said without hesitation.

'For some reason, I thought there'd been a second one.'

Pijollet was a neighbour of the Destrivaux family, a man of independent means who had been second or third violin at the Paris Opera and had returned to his native town. Being a neighbour of the Destrivauxs, it followed that he lived in the same street as the Manus.

'I didn't know them. All I knew was that there was someone a few doors down from me who gave piano lessons. As for the Destrivauxs, I'd see them in their garden from my window. In summer, of course! And also, when they were in their dining room, I could hear a murmur of voices from mine. Not clearly enough to understand. A word here or there. What I did hear was when they opened and closed the door ... I never get to sleep before two in the morning – a habit from working in the theatre. I read in bed. I'd noticed that someone in the Destrivaux household was coming home very late, even sometimes waking me with a start.'

All that to get to this question asked by Ducup:

‘Do you recall the night of the 7th of October?’

‘Yes, very well!’

‘How can you be so categorical?’

‘Because, in the afternoon, I ran into a friend I’d thought was still in Madagascar.’

‘But how do you know it was the 7th?’

‘We went to a café together, which is something I don’t often do, and there was a big calendar right in front of me. I can still see the number 7. Anyway, I’m certain that someone at the Destrivauxs’ came in at two in the morning, just as I was about to switch off the light.’

Ninety-seven files! Ninety-seven people, some of them quite unexpected, who ceased to be particular individuals – a policeman, a waitress, a sales assistant from Prisunic, a customer of the Georges bookshop – and became a fragment of the huge dossier that Nicole was checking through one last time.

At eight o’clock, Émile Manu – charged with the murder of Louis Cagalin, otherwise known as Big Louis, committed soon after midnight on 8 October in the building belonging to Hector Loursat de Saint-Marc, lawyer at the court – would step into the dock and his trial would begin.

During the three months that the investigation had lasted, rain had continued to fall from the sky, and the town had continued to be grey and dirty, with people coming and going like ants moving towards mysterious goals.

Now, all that was left were ninety-seven folders of thick yellow paper with names written on them in purple ink.

But day by day, night by night, hour by hour, each file, each sheet, had come to life, had become a man or a woman, with a job, a house, faults, vices, habits, a particular way of speaking or standing.

At first, there were only a handful of them: Edmond Dossin, whom his parents had sent to a sanatorium in Switzerland, the young pork butcher Daillat, Destrivaux, who had been tracked down in Les Halles in Paris, without a sou in his pocket, prowling around the barrows of vegetables waiting to be unloaded ... Then Luska, who could be seen every day on the pavement outside Prisunic selling big hunting boots at a discount ...

Then there was Grouin, who hadn’t spent much time with the gang, but was a part of it, and whose father was a departmental councillor!

For three months – except for the last few weeks – Émile Manu had left the prison every morning, accompanied by two gendarmes, and the days had been as monotonous, as meticulously regular as in the Georges bookshop.

Ducup, who knew that he wouldn't need him before ten or eleven, demanded that the prisoner be at his disposal by eight. At that hour, the corridors of the courthouse were still lit and women were washing the flagstones.

Manu would enter a small room that had been found for him: dirty walls, a bench, brooms and galvanized buckets in a corner. One of the gendarmes would go off to drink his coffee and come back with his newspaper, his moustache smelling slightly of rum. Then it was his colleague's turn.

The light bulb would grow paler. Footsteps would be heard over their heads: Ducup arriving, settling in for the day, sorting his papers, asking for the first witness to be brought in ...

There might have been people in the town who were still living with other ideas, other concerns, other plans, but for some, the world had frozen, as it were, a few minutes after midnight on 8 October.

'Are you Sophie Stüff, owner of an inn at Les Coquetteaux?'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'You were born in Strasbourg and were married to a Monsieur Stüff, a road sweeper. Having been widowed with two daughters, Eva and Clara, you lived first in Bettignies, where you worked as a cleaner. You were the mistress of a certain Troulet, who beat you, which led you to file a complaint against him.'

She was the manageress of the Auberge aux Noyés. Five pages in all, including the interrogation of her two daughters. But Loursat had gone back there himself, three times, four times, and had seen a photograph of Stüff, looking like a halfwit, along with photographs of her daughters when they were little, and one of this fellow Troulet, who had been a gendarme and had beaten his mistress.

'Which one was the most resourceful of the gang? In short, was it always the same one who paid?'

'Monsieur Edmond, yes!'

Only Loursat knew, through Nicole, that each of them, before setting off for a good time, would hand over money to Dossin!

‘When he danced, he’d put his cap on at a tilted angle and have a cigarette dangling from his lips. He’d brought records of dance music, because we didn’t have any. He’d hold himself very stiffly and claim that was what people did in dance halls.’

‘Did he flirt with you?’

‘He pretended to despise us.’ (This was Eva, the younger daughter, speaking.) ‘He called us minxes. He pretended to believe that we ...’

‘Say it!’

‘Don’t you get it? He thought there were bedrooms upstairs, and that we’d go up there with just anyone. He wouldn’t let go of it.’

‘And he didn’t ask to go up himself?’

‘No, but the pork butcher ...’

‘What did the pork butcher do?’

‘He was always sticking his hands on us. We’d try to push him off, but he’d start right in again. If it wasn’t me, it was my sister, and he would have done the same with my mother. Just so long as it was a woman! He’d laugh and tell disgusting stories.’

Ducup and Loursat had stopped shaking hands. Whenever Loursat entered the judge’s office, for an interrogation of Manu or a confrontation, they would say to each other coldly:

‘Please ... After you ... If counsel for the defence ...’

And Loursat seemed to bring to the courthouse, in his beard, in the folds of his clothes, in his grimaces, his glowering eyes, lingering odours of this strange world into which he would plunge, all alone, for hours on end, only to return with a new prey, a name unknown the previous day, a new yellow folder to be opened.

It was he who had discovered Monsieur Pijollet! It was he who had brought in, almost by force, fat Monsieur Luska, Ephraim Luska, who had thighs so thick they obliged him to walk with his legs spread.

The toy merchant, terrified at being involved with the law, stammered:

‘I thought my son was in love. I told his mother. We were both quite worried.’

Chief Inspector Binet had also plunged into the recesses of the town and occasionally emerged with a new witness.

Now, the pile of folders was there on the desk, the stove roared in fits and starts, and Nicole kept sitting up straight to hide the fact that she was dropping off to sleep.

It was she who served as Loursat's secretary, consulting notes and minutes, arranging, classifying and straightening, on a corner of the desk, always the same one. One day, not thinking, he had called her 'my dear'.

He had continued doing so, especially at night, when they were the only two people awake in the house, in the street, perhaps in the whole town, and he would sigh as he peered over at the cupboard where the spirits were kept.

Because, now, he only brought up one bottle of red wine a day and was sparing even with that! Occasionally, he would cheat, exit the courthouse through a side door and go to a bistro where they served quite good Beaujolais.

At first, he forced himself to drink only one glass. Then one day, unwisely, he made a gesture to indicate a refill, and now the owner poured the second glass without waiting.

On the other hand, he was never drunk these days. In fact, he was so sober that when it got late, like now, it would have been nice to have an extra drink in order to keep a sharp mind.

'I've underlined a contradiction in the Bergot interrogation,' Nicole said, drawing a thick line with her red pencil. 'He claims it was the 21st of October that Émile came and offered him that watch for sale. According to the file, it must have been the 14th or 15th. Bergot is out by a week.'

Bergot! Another one whose very existence they'd never before suspected! Who had ever been in his clockmaker's shop, so narrow you could easily pass it by, and so badly situated behind the market, between a butcher's and a grocer's?

Bergot was a big, gelatinous fellow with a sagging belly, who smelt rancid. When he came out of his lair full of old pendants, faulty watches and implausible jewellery, it was as if he was emerging for the first time

But he was just as alive as the others – all the others whose names, when you uttered them, no longer had the sonority of ordinary names.

It was as his daughter was speaking to him about Bergot that Loursat unwittingly stumbled on a definition of his own state: at that moment, he was like a scholar who has devoted years to a monumental work, a work in ten volumes on beetles, for example, or on the Fourth Dynasty.

Everything was there, on the table! In words that for most people were meaningless or banal.

Bergot ... Pijollet ... Stüff ...

For him, they were bulging with meaning, with life – with drama! The pile had grown like a column and ...

He stood up again and, despite the look his daughter threw him, opened the cupboard and had another little drop of rum.

After all, now that it was over, you had to keep the faith. Now that you were coming out of the tunnel, you mustn't let yourself be caught up again in everyday existence.

What existed was Big Louis – Big Louis dead, of course, because as a living person he was of no interest.

And someone had killed him ...

Someone else hadn't killed him: Émile, who moved between nervousness and dejection and who occasionally flew into a temper in Ducup's office, as if on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and screamed:

'But I tell you I'm innocent! You have no right! You're a bastard!'

He had called the slicked-down Ducup a bastard! At other times, he spoke like anyone else, anxious about trivial details.

'Will there be lots of people? Will there really be reporters from Paris?'

The weary Ducup had taken advantage of the Christmas holidays to recharge his batteries in the mountains.

It was becoming stifling. At times, it was like living, not among men, but among the shadows of men.

Three times already since the events, the pork butcher Daillat and his son had come to blows, even kicking each other.

'You don't scare me!' the young man would cry.

'To think you're a lousy thief ...'

'As if you didn't teach me to steal!'

People had to intervene. Once, the police had had to be called, because young Daillat had a bleeding lip!

As for Destrivaux, who had been tracked down in Paris and was determined not to return to Moulins, claiming that he was ashamed, his father, the cashier, had gone to join him. Together, they had come to the decision that the young man would pre-empt his call-up and go straight into the army.

He was in supplies, in Orléans, with a tunic that was too big for him, his glasses, obviously, and spots on his face.

Four interrogations and a confrontation with Manu.

'I don't understand how I could have done it! I let myself be drawn in. I always refused to steal money, even from my parents.'

The matter of the thefts had been hushed up. The elder Dossin had paid everyone off. The shopkeepers had been compensated, and nobody had lodged a complaint. The local newspaper had kept silent.

Nevertheless, a few people in town had become the object of unwanted attention. It could almost be said that there were two towns: the one that existed for no particular reason, empty of substance and meaning, and the other, which revolved around the Manu case, full of shadowy corners, of unexpected characters whom Loursat brought out into the open while waiting to reduce them to names in a file.

'Aren't you going to be tired tomorrow?'

She smiled ironically. Had she ever shown the least weariness, the slightest discouragement? She had stayed herself, serene and stubborn, to an unsettling degree, and there was something almost shocking about the roundness of her face and body.

She hadn't lost weight. She hadn't taken a holiday. Every evening her father would find her in his study, as unchangeable as ever.

She grabbed a last folder, one she had kept apart from the others and which contained a single sheet of cheap paper, the kind sold in grocer's shops. The writing was that of an uneducated woman, the ink the pale variety found in post offices and bistros, and the pen had sputtered.

Monsieur,

You are right to say that Manu is innocent. Don't worry about him. I know who killed Big Louis. If Manu is found guilty, I'll talk.

It had arrived in the post the day after Christmas, and all inquiries, including the one Loursat had demanded of the police, had failed.

He had thought of Angèle, the former maid, the one who had come to blackmail him and whom he had briefly suspected of killing Big Louis.

Angèle had found a job in a café in Nevers. He had gone to see her and obtained a sample of her handwriting.

It wasn't her.

He had also thought of Big Louis's lady friend, the one who lived on the outskirts of Honfleur, to whom the victim sent money. Another negative

result.

The town's two brothels had been searched, since it is often there that murderers who long to confide in someone go to find relief.

Ducup called it a prank, even a dubious manoeuvre on the part of the defence.

They had waited for a second letter, given that those who send missives of this kind are rarely content with an isolated manifestation.

And now tonight – it was ten to one – Nicole and Loursat gave a start and looked at each other: the doorbell had just rung in the hall.

They heard the Dwarf stir in her bed, but she was so terrified, there was no risk she would go down to open up.

Loursat was already at the door of the study. He went downstairs, crossed the hall and searched for the bolts.

'I saw the light on,' said a voice he recognized.

Jo the Boxer came in, muttering:

'Can we talk for a minute?'

Although Loursat had spent a number of evenings at the Boxing Bar, Jo had never set foot in his house and couldn't help looking around with curiosity. In the study, he nodded at Nicole, unsure whether to sit down or stay standing.

'I think I've just done something stupid!' he said, finally placing one buttock on a corner of the desk. 'You're going to bawl me out and you'd be right.'

He took a cigarette from the packet held out to him and measured a pile of folders with his eye.

'You know how it is at the bar in the evening, how slack it can be sometimes. Today, there were only four of us. You know Adèle – Adèle Pigasse, her full name is – the one who squints a bit, who plies her trade on the corner of the street. She's with a fairground wrestler, Gène from Bordeaux. He was there too. Plus the Dumbbell, the fat woman who specializes in soldiers. We were having a nice game of *belote* until it was time to go to bed. I don't know why I said suddenly, "The lawyer was great. He gave me a ticket." Because we always just call you "the lawyer". Then Adèle asks if it's a ticket for the trial, and if I could get her one. I tell her it's not easy, seeing as how everyone wants one. This already starts a bit of a squabble.'

“You could have given a thought to the girls,” she says. “You could have asked him yourself,” I say. “Anyway,” she says, “I’m more deserving of a place than you.” “Oh, and why’s that?” “Just because!” Can you imagine? We’re still playing, all through this! “And would you have got up at eight o’clock to go to the trial?” I suddenly say. “Of course I would!” she says. At this point, Gène butts in. “So she claims! Look, can’t we just concentrate on the game?” “I say I would and I will,” she says, “and anyway if I wanted a ticket, I’d have one faster than anybody!” “Oh, and how would you do that?” “And I’d even be in the front row!” “Maybe alongside the judges?” “No, alongside the witnesses!” “First of all, the witnesses aren’t in the front row, they’re in a side room. Secondly, you’re not a witness.” “That’s because I don’t want to be.” “No, it’s because you don’t have anything to say!” “That’s enough now, let’s play.” “Why are you making that face?” “Me, making a face?”

‘And so it goes on. Gène’s looking at her oddly. Adèle isn’t usually the kind of girl who puts on airs. We finish the game and I stand the last round. Then Adèle says, “To the health of the murderer!” “Why,” I ask, “do you know him?” “You bet I know him!” “Really?” The Dumbbell sighs and says, “Don’t you see she’s just trying to show off?”

‘But I’m thinking there’s definitely something up with Adèle, so I egg her on. I know what works with her. I pretend I don’t believe her. “Of course I know him!” she says. “I even know where he threw his gun.” “Where?” “I won’t say. But one evening when he couldn’t stand it any more ...” “Did you sleep with him?” “Yes, three times.” “Who is he?” “I won’t tell you.” “But you’ll tell me!” Gène says. “Not you,” she says, “not anybody!”

‘That’s where I did something stupid. I got carried away. I reminded Adèle that she’d run up a pretty big slate, and that in the summer, when she didn’t have enough to eat, she came to my place and I let her have lots of sandwiches without paying. “If you don’t tell me ...” I say. “No, I won’t say!” she replies. That’s when I slapped her in the face and yelled at her that she disgusted me, she was a louse, an ingrate, a ... I was so anxious to find out what she knew, I can’t remember what names I came out with. In the end, I threw her out, and Gène with her, because he’d started to take her side. Of course, Gène knows that if I wanted to talk ... But that’s another story and what he did is no business of ours ...

‘Anyway, that was it! When they’d gone, the Dumbbell and I looked at each other and wondered if we’d done the right thing. Then it occurred to me, as it’s all kicking off tomorrow, you probably wouldn’t be in bed yet ...’

‘Do you know her handwriting?’ Loursat asked, opening the thinnest of the files.

‘I don’t even know if she ever learned to write ... No, wait! She did write something at my place, she twice wrote to the sanatorium where her son is. That’s right, she has a five-year-old son in a sanatorium. But I didn’t see her handwriting.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘Not far from me, at the Tart’s place – she’s an old woman who has four rooms at the back of a yard and rents them out by the week.’

Loursat had turned to his cupboard and furtively, almost reluctantly, had drunk a mouthful of rum.

A quarter of an hour later, he was following Jo into the dark corridor of a tumbledown building. The floor was uneven, and water ran down the middle of it. At the end was a cobbled yard, with buckets, dustbins, and washing hanging on wires.

Jo knocked at a door. Inside, something stirred. A furred voice asked:

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s me, Jo! I need to talk to Adèle right away.’

The voice sounded as if it was coming from deep inside a bed.

‘She isn’t here.’

‘Didn’t she come back?’

‘She came back and went out again.’

‘With Gène?’

‘I don’t know who with.’

A window opened above them and a strange face emerged, partly lit by the moon: it was the Dumbbell.

‘I think Gène was waiting for her in the corridor. You scared them, Jo!’

‘I’d like to talk to her,’ Loursat said in a low voice.

‘Can we come up for a minute?’ Jo said.

‘It’s just that the room’s a mess ...’

They climbed an unlit spiral staircase. The Dumbbell appeared, wearing a leaf-patterned dressing gown and holding an oil lamp.

‘I apologize for receiving you like this, Monsieur Loursat. I had people in, two of them ...’

She had pushed the enamel bidet behind the bed.

‘Do you mind if I get back into bed? It’s freezing here!’

‘I want to ask you a question. You work pretty much the same beat as Adèle. Do you perhaps know which of the young people had relations with her?’

‘You mean before or after?’

Without thinking, he asked:

‘After what?’

‘After Big Louis! After what happened, I mean! Before, I know there was Monsieur Edmond. Although ... Well, I guess I can tell you. It was his first time. He wanted to know what it was like. But apparently ... Well, apparently it didn’t work out – if you see what I mean ...’

‘And after?’

‘I don’t remember. She only told me about that because the kid was so upset he burst into tears and gave her a hundred francs so she’d keep her mouth shut about it.’

‘Did you ever see her with any of the others?’

‘Wait, let me think ... No! We work it out so we don’t get in each other’s way. And the men try to hide most of the time ...’

‘You don’t know where she went?’

‘She didn’t say. All I know is, she has a married sister in Paris – a concierge, somewhere near the Observatoire. And she also has a brother in the mobile guard, but I don’t know where ...’

Ducup was woken with a start by a telephone call, as was the local chief inspector. Men left the police station, some on bicycles and others on foot. At three in the morning, Chief Inspector Binet left home in his turn.

That night, guards were placed around the railway station and the bus stations, in time for the first departures of the morning, while in all the hotels guests were asked for their papers.

At eight in the morning, the courthouse opened its doors. Behind the barriers, beneath an icy sky, two hundred people jostled one another.

It was inevitable, and yet he couldn't help but knot his thick brows: Madame Manu was there, in the cubbyhole where her son was waiting between two gendarmes. And the most absurd thing was that, to Loursat, there was something of the feel of a first communion or a wedding. Those people out in the icy streets, all heading, with their hands in their pockets and their noses red, towards the same point, while all the church bells rang out for mass ... Those tickets that had to be shown in order to gain admittance, those lawyers running about pointlessly in their robes, looking so self-important ...

Finally Manu, dressed from head to foot in a new navy-blue suit that his mother had judged smarter than his old one and polished shoes that also smelt new and that creaked ... Hadn't she just arranged the knot of his polka-dot tie?

She was all dressed up, with a discreet touch of perfume. She was weeping without tears, a habit of hers. She rushed towards Loursat and for a moment he thought she was going to bury her head in his chest.

'I entrust him to you, Monsieur Loursat! I entrust to you all I have left in the world!'

Yes, of course! If the case were to last a while longer, if, for example, it went on appeal to the high court, he would surely end up hating her with all his might. She was too good to be true! She had too much of everything: modesty, dignity, good upbringing, sentiment!

How could one not feel sorry for her? She was a widow. She was poor. She had worked to bring up her son. She had given him nothing but good examples, and yet here he was, appearing in court ...

She should have been a character in a tragedy, and the fact was, there were times when she was touching, times when she was suddenly out of her depth, when for no reason she forgot where she was and looked around her with all the anxiety of a small child lost in the street.

Loursat didn't like her. Too bad. He was sure Émile had always been dying with impatience in their excessively clean little house in Rue Ernest-Voivenon.

'Do you still have hope, Monsieur Loursat?'

'Certainly, madame, certainly!'

What ensued was a scrum. Everyone was afraid of forgetting something. The presiding judge, already backstage in his red robe, occasionally half opened the door to the courtroom, anxious to know if it would be warm enough, because there was frost on the windowpanes and the light had the glare of steel.

Loursat glanced into the witness room and saw Nicole sitting calmly at the end of a bench.

The police had not yet tracked down Adèle Pigasse or Gène from Bordeaux. Ducup looked awful, his eyes red from fatigue: his health wasn't wonderful, and after Loursat's telephone call he hadn't been able to get back to sleep.

'All rise for the court!'

Loursat, sleeves loose, headed straight for his bench, grimacing so much you expected to hear a muffled groan. He placed the files in front of him, the pile of ninety-seven yellow folders, with a menacingly self-satisfied air and looked around the room, at where the judges sat, where the public sat, his whole body quivering.

The jurors were selected at random.

'No objection from the defence?'

'No objection.'

Jo the Boxer was present in the front row, looking as if he was part of the family. They proceeded with the calling of witnesses, even though there was still a lot of noise in the courtroom.

'Since this is a very delicate case,' the presiding judge said sadly, 'I warn the public that I shan't tolerate any disturbance, and that at the first incident I shall clear the court.'

Monsieur Niquet was his name. He'd been a regular in the house at the time of Loursat's father. Nobody was more filled with goodwill than he was. He had too much goodwill, and his clear eyes, as blue as an angel's, appealed to everyone to recognize his efforts.

The unfortunate thing was his chin, his chin and his mouth. The chin was exactly as broad as the rest of his face, as well as being flat, and the mouth

went from ear to ear and was always half open. It was a real handicap: whenever Monsieur Niquet was serious or sad, those who didn't know him might think he was laughing in a sardonic or stupid manner.

'I must immediately inform the gentlemen of the jury that the public prosecutor has decided not to call one of the main witnesses for the prosecution, Monsieur Hector Loursat de Saint-Marc, so that the latter may assume the defence of the accused. This testimony is, in any case, rendered unnecessary by the fact that the accused does not deny any of the points established at the beginning of the investigation by Monsieur Loursat de Saint-Marc.'

Everyone looked at Loursat and, like a zoo animal, he slowly turned his head towards the public, aware of their curiosity.

As for Manu, sitting on his bench between the gendarmes, he really did seem, in his blue suit and polka-dot tie, like a first communicant, or in any case like a very young man. Occasionally, when he had summoned up courage by looking at the floor, he would glance anxiously in the direction of the crowd, in which he spotted some familiar faces.

It was cold, despite the large number of people, and as the trial was due to last at least three days, the judge, making a slight digression, promised the jurors that he would make sure a stove was installed as soon as the court next adjourned.

The charges were read. Émile was questioned, and replied simply, his eyes fixed on his lawyer.

Then Loursat stood up, hair flying.

'Your Honour, something new has occurred that obliges me to ask the court for a postponement of this trial to a later date. Last night, a woman declared that she knew the murderer of Big Louis.'

'Where is this woman?'

'The police are searching for her. I ask that a subpoena be issued to her by every possible means and that in the meantime ...'

Lengthy deliberations ensued. Rogissart was consulted, and he sent for Ducup.

'We understand that the search will continue and that Adèle Pigasse will be brought here as soon as possible. That shouldn't stop us from beginning to hear the ninety-seven witnesses. Bring in the first witness!'

The first witness was Ducup, who, for the next hour and a quarter, would give a detailed account of his investigation.

‘... Eighteen years old ... Has already distinguished himself by petty thefts from his first employers ... A loner, quick to take offence ... Until the day he joins the little group that meets at the Boxing Bar, and which has never previously drawn attention to itself ... He gets drunk ... To show off, he steals the car of an honourable citizen ... Because Manu is a proud character, a malcontent, the kind who becomes a rebel ... His concern is not so much to enjoy himself, like other young people his age, as to gain admittance – through the tradesman’s entrance! – to a patrician house that has impressed him ...’

Ducup was cutting like a well-sharpened penknife, curling his lips, turning every now and again towards Loursat.

‘His answers and his attitudes are inspired by the same pride, and even his fake suicide attempt, through which, as he’s about to be arrested, he persists in trying to attract attention ...’

Loursat couldn’t help looking at Émile Manu, and a vague smile hung in his beard.

All this was true, he sensed it! A young man ravaged by an awareness of his own inferiority ...

One day when Loursat had gone to see Madame Manu in Rue Ernest-Voivenon and then returned to the prison, Émile had asked him with a bitter grin:

‘Did she show you the watercolours? They’re all over the house. It was my father’s great ideal. He’d do them every evening and every Sunday, basing them on postcards.’

A little later, he had felt the need to say:

‘In my room, there’s a wash-basin, with a bowl and a pitcher with pink flowers. Only, I wasn’t allowed to use it, because it might break, and when you stand back up, you might spatter water everywhere. So, instead, I had to use an enamel pitcher on a white-wood table, with a piece of linoleum on the ground.’

He had suffered from everything: his cheap raincoat with its horrible colour, his shoes that had been resoled two or three times, and probably also no doubt the instinctive respect with which his mother had talked to him about the rich and about the young girls to whom she gave lessons.

In the bookshop, he had suffered from serving his former classmates and being obliged to go over the rows of books with a feather duster every morning!

Suffered from being shut in all day long, only seeing life as it flowed by through the shop window ...

Glimpsing young people like Edmond Dossin coming out of college after eleven o'clock, books under their arms, and walking up and down Rue d'Allier four or five times before going to lunch ...

Having to run errands, going all over town with big packages, ringing at customers' doors – sometimes the servants gave him a tip!

Ducup didn't say all this. He didn't know these details.

'A rebel ... Quick to take offence ...'

That was sufficient! With one thing that made it worse:

'And yet he had only good examples to follow ...'

Loursat searched for the boy's eyes with his own. Good examples! But of course he had! You only had to see the photograph of his father, so gentle and so contented despite his flushed, tubercular cheeks and his narrow shoulders!

An industrial draughtsman at Dossin's, working on agricultural machinery – director of technical services, he called himself!

He had come from Cape tang. He had nobody left but his mother. When he had died, they'd had to keep sending her two hundred francs a month to live, and the old woman wrote on her calling cards: *Émilie Manu, lady of independent means, Cape tang!*

Hadn't Émile's mother put up a brass plate with the words *Piano teacher*, even though she had no diploma and could only smooth the rough edges off children or give a vague musical tinge to indifferent young girls?

And the steaks! Émile had mentioned them once: those pieces of meat that were eternally too small, too thin ... With the ritual phrase:

'You have to build up your strength ...'

What could Ducup possibly understand of all this? Or any of the people in the courtroom?

'The investigation established that, up until last autumn, Émile Manu had only one friend, or rather one companion, Justin Luska, the son of a shopkeeper, who works just opposite the Georges bookshop where Manu was an assistant ... Previously, the two young people were at school together ... It's worth noting that Manu was a very good pupil, a fast learner who always got good marks. Luska, on the other hand, because of his red hair, and his name, his real name, which is Ephraim, and the fact that his father was from Eastern Europe, was his classmates' pet hate ... Two

children, two temperaments that are already taking shape ... Luska is gentle and patient, and endures the coarsest and sometimes the most brutal jokes in silence ...'

It was still true! Except that Ducup, of course, understood nothing of any of it! It was also true that Luska, in order to learn commerce, had no shame about selling from a stall on the pavement outside Prisunic, being what was called a barker, easily the toughest and most humiliating position.

He dressed badly and didn't care. People constantly told him he smelt bad, like his father's shop, and he didn't protest.

The bosses at Prisunic forbade their outside staff from wearing overcoats, which would have made them look like victims, and, following this rule, Luska spent the winter with two sweaters, one on top of the other, under his jacket.

'I was able to establish that it was Manu who prevailed upon his companion to introduce him to a group of young people who might be called, not without some romanticism, the gilded youth of the town ... That evening, it was raining and from half past eight Manu waited for Luska under the big clock which serves as a sign for Monsieur Truffier in Rue d'Allier. Luska arrived late, because his mother, as often happens, had just had an attack of angina. The two young people set off for the Boxing Bar to meet up with the group, which had made it their meeting place ...'

Loursat, who seemed to be dozing, slowly raised his head: Ducup was just getting to the difficult part.

'No complaint having been lodged, no damage done, the law has not seen fit to retain certain acts performed by the members of this group ... Let us just say that these young people suffered from the sickness of our time, letting themselves be influenced by certain books, certain films, certain examples against which they didn't have the moral strength to defend themselves.'

Pleased with his tact, Ducup went on:

'We did not live through the era when romanticism dictated that young people think themselves consumptives. The oldest among us have known the era in which the cavalry officer was the ideal type, then, closer to us, the era of the "bright young things". We are now living through the gangster era, and we shouldn't be surprised if ...'

'Idiot!' Loursat happily muttered into his beard.

It was too easy! It was true, and it was false! And he was the only one who knew, sitting there in all his monstrous heaviness, surrounded by puppets.

He hadn't had a drink this morning. He was waiting for the hearing to be adjourned so that he could rush to the bistro opposite and knock back two or three glasses of red wine. From time to time, he would feel his contempt or his resentment rising to his throat, or perhaps it was the bad taste he always had in his mouth in the morning.

When he was young, he had barely been aware of the existence of people like Émile Manu: poor and impatient, always short of money.

Had he really been aware of anything? It was as if he had lived in a classical tragedy, surrounded by noble sentiments, and, when he had loved, he had done so totally, leaving no room for doubt or for the mundane.

Wasn't it extraordinary to be thinking about that in this courtroom, which already existed at that time and had seen cases just like this one pass through its doors?

And he had seen nothing! The town had been exactly the same as now, that was unquestionable, with the Rogissarts, the Ducups, his sister Marthe, the already elegant Dossin, along with the poorer neighbourhoods, bars like Jo's, furtive women walking the pavements.

He had lived in an ideal world, mixing studies and love. Or rather ...

He had loved, and therefore it had been enough! He had loved inside, deep inside himself! What need, therefore, to show it, to indulge in more or less grotesque demonstrations?

He would kiss his wife, then shut himself in his study and see her again for meals. She was expecting a child, and that made him happy. He had a daughter, and he dropped by the nursery three or four times a day.

To use Ducup's terms, it was the *traditional* era. The town was as clear-cut as a construction set: the Courthouse, the Prefecture, the Town Hall and the Church! The Magistrates and the Lawyers! The upper middle classes and, below them, the people you didn't know, who went to their offices or shops in the morning, the shopkeepers noisily raising their shutters in the first light of day ...

That era had come to an abrupt end when Geneviève had run off with Bernard!

And his reaction, instead of yelling and moaning, had been to erase it all in one fell swoop, like chalk from a blackboard.

Nothing but fools! A town of fools, poor humans who didn't know what they were doing on earth and who walked straight ahead like oxen under a yoke, some with bells round their necks!

The town had become nothing but a stage set surrounding a little hole that Loursat animated with his life, his heat, his smell, his haughty contempt: his study and, beyond his study, a kind of no man's land, an untidy house in which a little girl who didn't interest him had grown up ...

The judges? Fools! Cuckolds, most of them!

The lawyers? Fools too, and, in some cases, scoundrels!

Fools, all of them!

The Dossins who only thought about having the most beautiful house in town, and Marthe who started the fashion, unseen in Moulins since well before the war, for butlers in white gloves!

Rogissart who went on pilgrimages in the hope of persuading Heaven to give him a child – no doubt a child as tall and thin as him and his wife!

Ducup who would become something, because he was doing everything he had to do to achieve that!

A good stove, red wine, dark red, and books, all the books on earth. He knew everything! He had read everything! He could laugh bitterly, alone in his corner.

'Bunch of fools!'

He would gladly add:

'Depraved fools!'

And then a gunshot had gone off in his house and he had found something like a whole nest of kids!

Then he had started running all over town after them ...

He had discovered people, smells, sounds, shops, lights, feelings, a magma, a swarming life that didn't resemble classical tragedies, fools who were passionate and unexpected, indefinable relationships between people and things, windy street corners, a lingering passer-by, a shop still open for some reason, and a short young man waiting nervously, waiting beneath a big clock that was familiar to the whole town for a companion who was to lead him to the future ...

Every now and again, Loursat would stir with a grunt, and everyone would turn to look at him, starting with Ducup, who was afraid of losing the thread of his argument, even though he had learned it by heart.

Nobody could understand why he, Loursat, was there. He should have seized the opportunity to go travelling or keep to his sickbed. His sister had told him that. Wasn't she sick? Hadn't her son been so sick he'd needed to go to Switzerland for the climate?

Dossin had come to see him too, and Rogissart, who had spoken to him, not only as a parent but as a magistrate.

In short, although he was on the defence bench, it was almost as if he were the accused! And what would he do when they talked about his daughter?

Because they would have to talk about her! Ducup was getting there, gradually, in a roundabout way.

'What demonstrates that these young people were more reckless than wicked is that after the accident caused by Émile Manu, they didn't for a second think of leaving the injured man on the road, despite the perilous aspects of their situation. This attitude, unfortunately, cannot be held to the credit of the accused, who admits that at that moment he was busy vomiting at the side of the road and had no idea where he was ... At that point, Mademoiselle Loursat demonstrated both pity and composure. She agreed for her house to be ...'

At which Loursat felt like saying, like a harmless madman during a meeting on which he has stumbled by chance:

'Not true!'

Although he didn't say it, it was clear from his scornful demeanour.

It wasn't true! None of it was true! Not the pity, and not even the composure. He was starting to be familiar with this composure that everyone attributed to his daughter. He knew now that it came to her at those moments when things looked most on the verge of collapse.

The truth was, first of all, that they were all drunk. He had questioned them one by one. None of them had much memory of what the others had done. The rain had been falling, blurring everything. They didn't know exactly what had happened. The windscreen wiper was still moving back and forth. Manu, who thought he had seen blood, had clung to a tree and vomited. A car had passed, going in the opposite direction, and as their car wasn't properly parked, someone had yelled out:

'Bunch of idiots!'

Big Louis was moving. They didn't yet know who he was, but, in the red glow of the rear light, they could see him moving, getting to his knees,

trying to stand, half his face red with blood, a wild look in his eyes, one leg strangely contorted.

‘Don’t go!’ he cried. ‘Don’t go! Help me!’

And in truth, the main reason they went to him was to get him to shut up.

‘You got me, you bastards!’ he said to them. ‘You have to take me somewhere now. But not to hospital. And especially not to the cops, you hear? Who are you? Shit, you’re just kids!’

That was the reality! It was he who had given the orders! Daillat the pork butcher had carried him, helped by Destrivaux, who held the man’s feet and kept losing his glasses. They had forgotten all about Manu. He had collapsed at the foot of the tree, and they had to carry him too, limp, wet and dirty, and get him back in the car.

This had all come out during Nicole’s interrogation. She didn’t talk about pity, but simply replied to a question.

‘It was him! He told us to fetch a doctor, but not to say anything to the police. Edmond had already noticed his tattoos.’

‘Who went for the doctor?’

‘We decided it should be Edmond because he knew him best.’

They would hear Dr Matray too. His testimony was there, in folder number 17.

‘I thought at first that the injured man was alone with Mademoiselle Loursat and her cousin Edmond Dossin. Then I saw the door of the next room move. It was only gradually that I realized there was a whole group of young people, sick with emotion and fear. One of them was lying on the floor, and I advised them to let him sleep because he was clearly drunk.’

Poor Matray, who treated the best families in the town and who had the solemn, honest appearance of a Jules Verne hero!

‘I tried to find out how each of them acted in the course of that night,’ continued Ducup, who occasionally snapped his fingers because they were numb with cold.

Not true! It was Loursat who had demanded it!

‘Mademoiselle Loursat demonstrated remarkable courage and, in the opinion of Dr Matray, performed like a true nurse.’

In that case, Nicole was still living automatically on the strength acquired then, and that was what made her look so calm!

‘Monsieur Edmond Dossin, who was very worried, asked the doctor for advice, but the doctor couldn’t give him any. He will tell you later ...’

Tell them what? That it wasn't his fault! That he was ready to pay for the injured man to be admitted to a clinic! That he had suggested getting a deputy who was a friend of his father to act on behalf of Big Louis ...

Last but not least, Destrivaux, who had lost his glasses and saw nothing of the scene except what he could make out with his myopic eyes and his poor Destrivaux brain!

Someone would be sure to ask Loursat:

'And you really didn't hear anything?'

He wouldn't even mention the long corridors, the staircases, the two wings of his house. He would say:

'I was drunk, gentlemen!'

Which wasn't true either. He had been as hot, numb and heavy as on any other evening, wrapped up in his own solitude.

The jurors were trying to assume a grave, unemotional air, because the case involved too many people they knew. The crowd was waiting for Ducup to leave the stage and the real actors to appear. Occasionally, someone approached the prosecutor's bench and whispered something to Rogissart, who had a box of mint lozenges in front of him.

These comings and goings meant:

'They haven't found her yet!'

The Pigasse girl! Yes, here, Adèle had become the Pigasse girl!

A glance from Rogissart to Loursat:

'No, nothing yet. I'm sorry.'

Ducup's lips were dry and he was starting to slow down. He couldn't see Loursat but he could sense him there, to his right, huddled and Mephistophelian.

'It was that night, about four in the morning, that the accused began his relationship with Mademoiselle Loursat, who was tending to him at the same time as the injured man.'

They had done everything to spare him that! They had begged Loursat not to appear at the trial, not only for his own sake, but for his family, for his colleagues, for all the respectable people in Moulins!

Instead of which, he was displaying himself in the front row! And what if he told them what he was thinking at that precise moment? That in the morning, before coming to court, he had almost cut off his beard! That would have been a great joke to play on them!

He would have shown up freshly shaved, his hair neatly brushed, with an impeccable false collar!

‘In his third interrogation, on the 18th of October, the accused told us that the reason why he had gained admittance, thanks to his companion Luska, to a milieu that was unfamiliar to him was that he was in love with Mademoiselle Loursat. That was his explanation for the fact that when he woke that night, still feeling sick, he launched into a long, impassioned declaration. Mademoiselle Loursat, for her part, told us: “He was ashamed at what had happened and how untidy his clothes were. He begged me to forgive him. He was in a very emotional state. He confessed to me that he’d only been trying to get close to me.”’

As a witness, Ducup wasn’t allowed to refer to his notes. Occasionally, he was obliged to close his eyes to accurately recall a prepared phrase, a point of reference, the significance of a document.

‘What is certain is that Manu subsequently gained admittance to the house as often as the circumstances allowed him. I won’t go so far as to claim that he cynically took advantage of the fact that the accident had given him an excellent excuse. Nevertheless ...’

Not true! Ducup had never been eighteen, bursting with love and ambition! Nor had Loursat, but he had recently been sniffing about in the lives of other eighteen-year-olds!

‘From that point on, he would come every evening, I might say every night, since some days he wouldn’t get back to his mother’s house until three in the morning. He would enter like a thief, through the little door that leads to the alleyway.’

Not true! Not like a thief!

Loursat, feeling occasionally very remote from the courtroom, almost took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

‘To my questions about his relations with Mademoiselle Loursat, he answered quite cynically: “I don’t have to go into details about my private life.” But he didn’t deny that he took advantage of the intimacy created by this drama to frequently gain entrance to the young lady’s room.’

Loursat had been warned:

‘You’ll only make the task of the court more difficult than it already is. You’re bound to cause a scandal!’

And indeed, everyone was looking at him, and he glowered back at them, a self-satisfied pout showing through his beard.

‘At the slightest disturbance, I’ll clear the court!’ the judge said, as a murmur rose in the room, people shoving one another to satisfy their curiosity.

Ducup, his head hot and his hands cold, went on:

‘Twelve days later, the tragedy occurred. It was the aim of the investigation to establish what those twelve days meant to the inhabitants of the house.’

As far as Loursat was concerned, it was simple! His stove and his Burgundy, the books he took off the shelves at random, of which he might read three pages or fifty, the glasses he filled and that nice, warm atmosphere that seemed to emanate from him, so that he and it eventually formed a compact whole, until it was time for him to go to bed ...

‘On the matter of the relationship between the accused and Mademoiselle Loursat, it is pointless to ...’

Why not? They were lovers, of course! From the third day, to be precise, and then every day! Émile with ardour, excitement, pride and a kind of desperation, and Nicole probably enthralled by such frenzy.

They loved each other. They would have been capable of setting fire to the town if the latter had risen against their love.

And all the others, those who had unwittingly made it possible for them to finally meet – Edmond, Daillat, Destrivaux, Luska, Councillor Grouin’s son – were nothing more than vague stooges, extras who got in their way.

Even more so than Big Louis, who at least had the advantage of providing a kind of alibi, an excuse, a reason to be there ...

It had started so strongly, at such a high pitch, because of the drama, the car, the blood, everything, that they had immediately reached a paroxysm of intensity.

And now the pale-faced Ducup was cutting it all into thin slices in court!

With Rogissart in front of him, a little to his left, on the prosecutor’s bench, Loursat invisible but even more daunting to his right, and Judge Niquet sitting there with his huge face, doing the best he could, even taking notes.

‘I come now to the tragic night when ...’

Loursat was really thirsty now. He half rose, raised his hand like a schoolboy who has been caught short and muttered:

‘I think that a recess ...’

It all ended in a clamour of footsteps, chairs and benches.

In the afternoon, everyone went happily back to their old places. They looked at each other, exchanging polite or mischievous nods. Judge Niquet was quite proud of having had a monumental stove installed in record time, its pipe passing through the window. It smoked a bit, but that might have been because it had only just been lit.

In short, everyone felt comfortably installed in the case.

‘Unless the defence has any objection, we will call Destrivaux as our first witness, since he needs to get back to his barracks as soon as possible.’

He made his way through the court, apologizing to all those he was disturbing: there were people everywhere, and lawyers standing in the smallest corners.

The judge was really pleased, his mouth more monstrously wide than ever. He looked at the jurors, his associates and the prosecutor like someone meeting up again with good friends, and seemed to be saying to them:

‘You must admit it’s not going too badly! Especially now that we have this stove ...’

Then out loud, in a paternal tone, to Destrivaux:

‘Come forwards, don’t be afraid.’

Into his khaki trousers you could have fitted three pairs of buttocks the young man’s size, and the excessively high belt, by creating deep folds, restored the tunic to its proper proportions and made him look like a diabolio.

‘Please turn to face the jury ... Are you related to, or in the service of, the accused? ... Swear to tell the truth, the whole truth ... Raise your right hand ...’

Loursat couldn’t help smiling. He was looking at Émile Manu, who didn’t know he was being watched and was astonished at the sight of his old friend. Just then, there was a commotion at the back of the courtroom. It was Destrivaux, the father, raising his hand to his face, letting out a sob, his

theatrical attitude expressing his shame and his pain, and rushing to the exit, unable to bear any more.

The crowd closed again behind him, and the judge consulted his file.

‘Let’s see. You were one of Émile Manu’s companions. Were you part of the group on the night of the accident?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

There was no need to teach him how to answer, or to tell him that a witness had to keep a simple, modest demeanour!

‘Let’s see.’ (These were Monsieur Niquet’s favourite link words.)

‘Before that memorable evening, did you know the accused?’

‘By sight, Your Honour.’

‘Ah, by sight only! Because you live, I think, in the same street? But you weren’t friends or companions?’

It was as if he were making a sensational discovery, judging by the joy in his voice as he continued:

‘Since you both worked in town, didn’t you sometimes leave home at the same time?’

‘I was on my bike, Your Honour.’

‘I see, you were on your bike! But did any moral or other reason prevent you from being friendly with Émile Manu?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘What impression did the accused make on you when he was introduced to you at the Boxing Bar?’

‘No impression, Your Honour.’

‘Did he strike you as shy?’

‘No, Your Honour.’

‘Did you notice anything special about him?’

‘He couldn’t play cards.’

‘And you taught him? What game did you teach him?’

‘Écarté. Edmond gave him a lesson and won fifty francs from him.’

‘Was your friend Edmond very lucky?’

To which Destrivieux innocently replied, to be immediately thrown by the reactions of the public:

‘He cheated.’

That provoked the first laughter of the afternoon, and from then on everyone was increasingly well disposed.

‘Ah, he cheated! Was he in the habit of cheating?’

‘He always cheated. He made no secret of it.’

‘And despite that you all played with him?’

‘To try to figure out how he did it.’

Rogissart and the associate on his left exchanged little signs – the associate was famous in Moulins for his card tricks. Judge Niquet tried in vain to catch a little of this silent exchange, but it all went over his head.

‘I assume you had a lot to drink that evening?’

‘Like the other times.’

‘Meaning what? Roughly what quantity?’

‘Five or six glasses.’

‘Of what?’

‘Cognac mixed with Pernod.’

Another laugh spread in a growing wave to the back of the room. Only Manu kept his serious expression, listening with his chin on his hands, eyes fixed on Destrivaux.

‘Who suggested going to the Auberge aux Noyés?’

‘I don’t recall.’

But Manu had stirred, which clearly meant:

‘Liar!’

‘Did the accused spontaneously suggest ... shall we say, borrowing a car? Let’s see – how did you manage on the other evenings?’

‘Daillat would take us in his father’s van. But that evening it had been taken to Nevers to load some pigs.’

‘Which meant that Manu decided to get in the first car he found?’

‘We might have egged him on.’

‘Who do you mean by “we”?’

‘Pretty much everyone.’

He would have liked to be completely honest. He was making an effort. He knew he was being a coward, and that what he should have said was:

‘We made fun of the newcomer. We got him drunk. We challenged him to steal a car ...’

‘So basically, the accused drove you to the inn. Once you were there, what happened?’

‘We drank white wine – there was only white wine and beer left in the place – and we danced.’

‘Did Manu also dance? Who with?’

‘Nicole.’

‘If I’m not mistaken, there were two young women in this strange inn: Eva and Clara. What did you do to them?’

It was a bold way of putting it, and the judge was as proud as he was appalled.

‘We teased them.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Not from me anyway.’

‘What about your companions?’

‘I don’t know. I never saw anyone go upstairs.’

More laughs and smiles. Only Manu and Destrivaux didn’t find anything extraordinary in what was being said. It was their language, reminding them of familiar things.

‘I won’t ask you for an account of the accident. The examining magistrate did that magnificently for us this morning. I assume you often went to Mademoiselle Loursat’s house?’

‘Yes, often.’

‘To drink and dance? Weren’t you afraid the young lady’s father would appear one day?’

The most curious thing was that it was Manu whom Destrivaux looked at as if to ask:

‘What should I answer?’

‘Let’s move on!’ the judge resumed. ‘Did the presence of Big Louis in the house bring changes to the group’s activities?’

‘We were scared.’

‘Ah, you were scared! Scared, I presume, of seeing Big Louis cause a scandal?’

‘No ... Yes ... We were scared of him.’

Loursat heaved a deep sigh. Poor idiot of a judge! Hadn’t he got the idea? Didn’t he remember feeling scared as a child? The kids had been playing at being gangsters, and now here was a real one in their midst, a big, tattooed brute who had been in prison, who might even have committed murders!

Big Louis had taken advantage, damn it! He grossly exaggerated what he had done! And the kids boasted back to him about their petty larcenies!

‘Think carefully before answering, because this is serious. Did you ever discuss getting rid of Big Louis in one way or another? I ask you if, in the course of your get-togethers, either in the house, or in the Boxing Bar, or elsewhere—’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Who brought it up?’

‘I don’t remember. We assumed he’d keep blackmailing us, because he thought he’d found the mother lode and all he had to do was keep asking for money.’

‘And you talked about killing him?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Did you plan this cold-bloodedly?’

No, not cold-bloodedly! Loursat stirred on his bench. All this was pointless, since nobody was trying to understand these kids’ language! They might even have discussed the murder in detail, and it wouldn’t have meant anything! They liked dramatizing things, but it was all in fun!

‘Maître Loursat, do you have a question to ask the witness?’

They had noticed how agitated he was!

‘Yes, Your Honour. I’d like you to ask him who, apart from Manu, was in love with Nicole.’

‘Did you hear the question? Please don’t be afraid. I know the situation is somewhat abnormal, but you must see Maître Loursat purely as counsel for the defence. Please answer.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Would you allow me, Your Honour? Before Manu came on the scene, who was Nicole’s usual companion?’

‘Edmond Dossin.’

‘He made himself out to be her lover and wasn’t, isn’t that so? Basically, it was all part of the game! But was someone else in love, I mean really in love with Nicole?’

‘I think Luska.’

‘Did he confide in you?’

‘No, he didn’t talk much.’

‘Was it the accident and the fact that there was an injured man in the house that broke up the group?’

Destrivaux said nothing, and Loursat continued:

‘Wasn’t it rather the fact that Nicole now had a genuine lover?’

People were jostling a little at the back to see better. Destrivaux, not knowing what to say, bowed his head.

‘That’s all, Your Honour.’

‘No more questions? Prosecutor?’

‘No questions!’

‘If nobody has any objection to the witness rejoining his garrison ... Thank you, you may step down.’

Everyone knew they would get to this eventually, of course, but the judge nevertheless gave an uncomfortable little shudder as he said:

‘Call Mademoiselle Nicole Loursat ... I apologize, maître.’

Instead of shrinking, he seemed rather to swell!

‘You must swear to tell the truth, the whole truth. Raise your right hand and say: I swear ... You have stated both to the police and to the examining magistrate that on the evening of the 7th of October, the accused was in your room.’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

Perfectly self-controlled, she had given Manu a kind, simple glance.

‘Did you both go up to see the injured man?’

‘No, Your Honour. I’d been up about nine, when I took him his dinner.’

‘So Manu’s visit had nothing to do with looking after Big Louis?’

‘No, Your Honour.’

‘I shan’t insist ... Were you expecting any of your other companions that evening?’

‘No, by that point they hadn’t been for several days.’

‘Do you know why?’

‘Because they knew we would rather be alone.’

People were watching Loursat even more than her, and Loursat felt like smiling at them.

‘What time did Manu leave you?’

‘About midnight. I wanted him to get to bed early because he looked tired.’

‘Do you call that getting to bed early?’

‘The other days, he didn’t leave until about two or three in the morning.’

Rogissart was playing with his propelling pencil, staring at it with passionate interest.

‘Did you talk about Big Louis?’

‘I don’t remember, but I don’t think so.’

‘When Manu left you at the door of your room, he was supposed to be going straight out. And yet a few moments later, your father saw him coming down from the second floor. Is that correct?’

‘That’s definitely correct.’

‘What do you think Manu was doing on the second floor?’

‘He told you. He heard a noise and went upstairs.’

Rogissart conversed in a low voice with his associates. All three shrugged. A glance at Rogissart, who shook his head, then at Loursat.

‘Thank you, you may step down.’

She gave a little bow and, as naturally as could be, came and sat down next to her father in order to resume her secretarial functions. The judge coughed. Rogissart almost broke his pencil.

There was more movement at the back, without anyone quite knowing why.

‘Call the next witness ... Edmond Dossin ... Do you swear ... truth ... truth ... right hand ... towards the jury ... I see here a medical certificate stating that you are recovering from a serious illness and that your condition should be taken into consideration.’

He was indeed pale, with a feminine pallor. He knew it and was using it. He had no qualms about looking straight at Manu.

‘What do you know about this case? Please turn to face the jury and speak up.’

‘We were supposed to give back all the objects, the way we did in Aix.’

‘You mean that in Aix-les-Bains, where you played the same game, let’s say pretending to be gangsters, you gave back the stolen objects?’

‘We left them every morning by the springs, and the police would find them. In Moulins, we had decided we’d first build up an impressive amount of loot, particularly because we had a whole floor at our disposal.’

‘In your uncle’s house, you mean? What was the attitude of the accused towards you?’

‘He took everything seriously. Right from the first day, I told the others he’d bring us nothing but trouble.’

Loursat didn’t appear to be listening. There were even moments when he seemed to be asleep, his arms folded over his chest, his head tilted forwards, and one of the associates nudged Judge Niquet with his elbow.

‘Did the accused strike you as frightened by the turn events had taken?’

‘He was in a panic. Especially when Big Louis started asking for money.’

‘Did you know he would steal this money?’

No answer. Nicole, during this time, had been consulting the file and now handed her father a sheet of paper.

‘I have a question, Your Honour. Would you be so kind as to ask the witness if he had relations with the Pigasse girl, whom the police haven’t yet managed to find?’

‘Did you hear the question? Please answer.’

‘Yes ... or rather ...’

‘Several times?’ Loursat insisted.

‘Just once.’

The stove was still smoking. The hands moved slowly around the yellowish dial of the clock behind the judge’s bench.

And always, like a drone, the same formulas, the same syllables, which eventually became meaningless, nothing but a refrain:

‘... turn to face the jury ... No questions, maître?’

Loursat jumped, because he had been thinking of something else. He had been thinking, at that precise moment, that his nephew Edmond wouldn’t make old bones, that he probably only had two or three years to live!

It was just an impression. He glowered at him now, with that expression he had when he penetrated to the heart of things.

Did he have a question? No, it wouldn’t lead anywhere. There was a yellow folder full of questions and answers! About all kinds of things, including the whereabouts of Edmond on the evening of 7 October.

He had remained in the Boxing Bar until around midnight. Then he had gone home, and Destrivaux had walked him as far as his door.

It might have been true, it might have been false: they hadn’t been able to establish it either way.

If Edmond had killed Big Louis ...

He was quite capable of it, and so was Destrivaux. They were all capable of it, and they didn’t need a specific motive: it was simply the logical end-point of the game!

Even Manu!

Why hadn’t Loursat ever believed that it was Manu who had fired that shot? There he was, right in front of him, his body tense again, glaring at Edmond Dossin with a look full of hate!

He must have hated him from the first day, because he was rich, because he was the leader of the little gang, because he behaved towards Nicole as if he owned her, because he belonged to an important family, because everything!

And Dossin had hated him too, for all the opposite reasons. But it wasn't by means of questions and answers that you could explain such things to a dull bunch of jurors, or to the judge.

'When you heard that Big Louis had been murdered, did you immediately think of Émile Manu?'

'I don't know.'

'Did you think of another of your companions?'

'I don't know ... No, I don't think so.'

Once all the young people had been examined, things would move faster. But the judge was determined to do his job fairly.

'Earlier, your companion Destrivieux expressed his shame and regret at having let himself be dragged along such a dangerous path. Do you too ...'

Edmond blurted out:

'I'm sorry.'

Not like Destrivieux, who had prepared his little speech and had recited in a contrite tone:

'I'm sorry for everything I did and for bringing shame to my family, who gave me nothing but good examples. I ask forgiveness for the harm I may have done, and I ...'

The hearing would last another hour by the light of the courtroom's big yellowish globes, which left areas of shadow just like in church, picking some faces out of the chiaroscuro.

In the witness room, Angèle, in her shrill voice, was telling obscene stories about the Loursat household, about the father, the daughter and even the Dwarf – who was there too, sitting sullenly in her corner.

When everyone left the courthouse, in a stampede like after high mass, they felt disorientated at rediscovering the open air, the street lamps, the frozen cobbles, the familiar noises, the cars, the passers-by carrying on with their everyday lives.

Jo the Boxer had fallen into step behind Loursat.

'I wonder where she could have gone! I've looked everywhere. I wouldn't be surprised if she hasn't even left town ... What do you think? Hasn't gone too badly so far, has it?'

The Dwarf ran around the shops on the way home, trying to buy enough to make a cold meal, and the house felt and sounded empty.

They didn't know what to do or where to put themselves. They were no longer in the case, but they weren't in life either.

Nicole ate. Several times, Loursat caught a look she threw him, and although he knew what she was thinking, he hoped she wouldn't say it out loud.

It had been a long time since she had last looked at her father like this: with curiosity, but mixed with another, more timid feeling, not entirely gratitude and not yet affection, a mixture that might be called sympathy. Admiration, perhaps?

'What are you doing this evening?' she asked, getting up from the table.

'Nothing. I'm going to bed.'

It wasn't true, which worried her a little. He knew it did, and why. But he couldn't reasonably promise her not to drink!

Besides, he needed to drink, all by himself, he needed to shut the door, to smoke, to shake the grating of the stove, to sit down, stand up, grunt, get his beard and hair in a mess.

On three occasions, he distinctly heard her come to his door and stand listening, hoping to put her mind at rest.

He was going round in circles. One of them, one of those kids, had gone into Big Louis's room and shot him ...

And whoever it was knew that he was the murderer and that Manu was innocent! He had known it for months! He had been interrogated like the others, he had answered, he had gone to bed every night, slept and woken in the morning ready to face another day!

Some evenings, in the hope of tearing himself away from his nagging solitude, he had prowled the streets, had approached another shadowy figure – Adèle Pigasse – and followed her to a stinking room to make love.

Each time, he had been on the verge of telling her ...

He had resisted. He had returned. He had resisted again and, ultimately, he had yielded.

How had he said it? Had he boasted, sneered, feigned cynicism? Or had he, on the contrary, admitted how scared he was?

As for him, Loursat, he wasn't even capable of ...

He had looked in the whites of their eyes, though: Destrivaux, so anxious to please everyone, and Dossin, quite happy to escape his responsibilities because he was sick!

Dossin seemed to say:

'You see how frail I am, that I don't have long to live. I was having fun. It really doesn't matter!'

The following morning, the pork butcher would be examined, then Luska, whose father had been melting like wax since the start of all this.

Church bells were ringing. Adèle and Gène were hidden somewhere, presumably aware that they were being searched for.

Ten times Loursat stood up, went and opened the cupboard and poured himself a few drops of rum, each time a little more. Finally, he went to bed with the nagging sensation that there was only one small effort still to make, but that this effort was impossible.

The Rogissarts were pleased! The two hearings had gone well. Certain subjects had been sufficiently skated over. The bear hadn't behaved too badly, and Nicole had been relatively discreet.

Telephone calls had been exchanged. Dossin wanted to know if there was anything untoward likely to happen the next day. Marthe was in her son's room, watching over Edmond, who had a slight temperature.

Luska had locked himself in his room, a room that wasn't a real bedroom, but a kind of shed in the yard.

As for Madame Manu, she was praying, alone in her house, praying then weeping then going to make sure the door was properly shut, because she was afraid. Finally, she wept again a little as she fell asleep, murmuring syllables in a low voice as if to soothe her sorrow.

At eight o'clock in the morning, there was another procession in the streets, men, women, groups converging on the courthouse, people who already recognized each other, who didn't yet say hello but were starting to exchange vague smiles.

Manu was wearing the same suit and tie. Perhaps because he was tired, he looked shiftier than the day before.

As for Jo, Loursat didn't see him in the witness room, where he should have been because he was due to be called that morning.

'All rise!'

'... next witness ... tell the truth ... whole truth ... jurors ...'

It was Daillat, dressed in brown, his face full of freckles, his hair close-cropped like a soldier's. He wasn't taking things seriously, and he even turned and winked, presumably at friends of his in the courtroom.

'You're a pork butcher, you work for your father, and during the investigation you admitted that on several occasions you took hams from the storeroom.'

To which he replied, in a boastful tone:

‘If I hadn’t admitted it, nobody would ever have noticed!’

‘You also took money from the till.’

‘As if the others made any bones about that!’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t quite understand.’

‘I mean everyone raids the till. My father, my uncle.’

‘It seems to me that your father—’

‘The accounts never add up, and every evening my mother kicks up a fuss. So a little bit more or a little bit less ...’

‘You made the acquaintance of the accused at the Boxing Bar on the evening of the accident and ...’

Loursat gave a start. Someone who had just come in and was now in the third row, incapable of getting any further because of the lawyers in robes blocking his way, was waving at him in a not very discreet manner.

Loursat didn’t know the man. He was quite young and seemed to belong to the same set as Jo the Boxer.

Loursat stood up and went over to him.

‘It’s urgent!’ the man whispered to him, handing him a crumpled envelope over his shoulder.

And while the examination of Daillat continued, Loursat, having returned to his seat, read without reacting, in spite of the anxious look that Rogissart was throwing him from a distance:

I found them. It wouldn’t be right to involve them, because there are things I didn’t know, and Gène would also be in trouble. I managed to get Adèle to tell me. It was Luska who bumped the guy off. I’m sure you’ll find a way to nail him without talking about the girl.

I’m in the witness room. But don’t say a word about it! You promised me you’d be straight.

The judge inclined his head to see Loursat’s face. The unfortunate man, with his vast chin and his mouth like a sabre slash, still looked as if he was laughing!

‘I asked you, maître, if ...’

‘I’m sorry. No, I have no questions.’

‘Prosecutor?’

‘No questions! It might perhaps be wise to move things on and not abuse the patience of the jurors ...’

‘... next witness ...’

Manu threw another dazed look across the courtroom.

‘Ephraim Luska, known as Justin ... Swear to ... whole truth ... say: I swear ... turn ... jury ... You made the acquaintance of the accused ... No, I’m sorry, I see from the file that you’ve known him for a long time, having been at school with him.’

The stove was smoking, and the smoke was getting in the eyes of the ninth juror, who was obliged to wave his handkerchief.

Loursat sat motionless, his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, his eyes shut.

His neighbours at the back of the courtroom didn't know him. Perhaps they sensed vaguely that he belonged to that race of men you see lying in the corridors of night trains, or in railway stations, or that you find in police stations, waiting patiently on the ends of benches or trying desperately to explain themselves in an impossible language, the kind who are made to get off at borders, who are given a rough time by the authorities and who, perhaps because of that, have beautiful, touching doe eyes.

After all, wasn't it for the mundane reason that his corduroy jacket smelt bad that people moved away from him? He didn't seem to notice. He looked straight ahead, like a crank or a fool, pushed from one side to the other. He sported a long, droopy Bulgarian moustache, the kind you saw in pictures before the war, and you could easily imagine him in some national costume or other, with at the very least metal buttons on his jacket, those buttons that contain gold coins, boots of a special model, rings in his ears, a whip in his hand ...

Poor Judge Niquet, with his head split in two by his mouth, really did resemble a shrill, cynical ventriloquist's dummy!

What was the judge saying? Loursat heard him, and some phrases lodged in his memory without his being aware of it.

He was looking at the man pinned to the wall by the crowd, behind the rows of lawyers. He must have been standing on tiptoe to keep his balance.

'... born in Batum on ...'

It was in the files! The Luska file. Luska's father had been born in Batum, at the foot of the Caucasus, where twenty-eight races jostled in a single town. Did his ancestors wear silk robes, fezes, turbans? Whatever the case, one day he had left, as doubtless his father had left for somewhere before him. By the time he was ten, the family was in Constantinople and, two years later, they were in Rue Saint-Paul in Paris!

There was something brown, oily, almost limp about it all. And the end-product of all this fermentation, the young Luska struggling now on the witness stand, was a redhead, with a frizzy shock of hair in the shape of a halo!

‘I first met Edmond Dossin one evening when I was playing billiards at the Brasserie de la République ...’

Which proved that the judge, too, had wondered how the humble Luska, a barker on the pavement outside Prisunic, had come to insinuate himself into Dossin’s elegant entourage. Feudal lords need courtiers. Dossin was a feudal lord in his way, and the redhead from Eastern Europe must have flattered all his instincts, laughed when required, approved, crept about, smiled, bent to his every whim.

‘How long ago was this?’

‘It was last winter.’

‘Don’t be afraid to face the jury and speak up.’

‘It was last winter.’

Loursat frowned. He had probably been looking at the father at the back of the room for five minutes now, thinking about him, trying to sense all the ...

With the eyes of someone waking with a start, he leaned towards Nicole and said a few words to her in a low voice. While she leafed through the files, he examined young Luska, almost surprised to see him still on the stand and trying, like a latecomer at a mass, to guess what point had been reached.

‘That’s right,’ Nicole said. ‘It was you who had him called.’

He got to his feet. It hardly mattered if he was cutting someone short.

‘I beg your pardon, Your Honour. I note that we have in the room a witness who has not yet been examined.’

Everyone looked around the room, of course. The public turned, scrutinizing its own ranks. And the extraordinary thing was the gently dazed air of Luska the father, who was looking around with the others, pretending to believe that he wasn’t the person referred to.

‘Who is that, Maître Loursat?’

‘Ephraim Luska.’

All the while, the son stood motionless on the stand, scratching his nose.

‘Ephraim Luska! Who let you in? How is it that you’re not with the witnesses? Which way did you come in?’

The man with the big gentle eyes pointed vaguely at a door through which he certainly hadn't passed. Once again, he was a victim of fate! He didn't understand why he was there, or how, and he muttered to himself as he made his way between the rows.

'Let's not beat about the bush.'

Monsieur Niquet had said this without thinking, without looking at young Luska, and he was surprised to hear the room laugh, only understanding when he at last noticed the witness's shock of bushy hair.

'Any questions, prosecutor?'

'I would only like to ask the witness, who has known the accused since their schooldays, if he considered him to be of an open, happy nature or rather as someone quick to take offence.'

At first, Manu, knowing he was being watched, hadn't dared to be natural. By now, forgetting the room around him, he could be seen occasionally making involuntary grimaces. At that moment, he jutted his head forwards a little to get a better look at Luska, and his facial expression became again that of a little boy challenging another.

Luska, too, turned to him, and the expression in his eyes was even blacker than that of his former classmate.

'Definitely quick to take offence,' he said at last.

Manu sneered. He seemed about to appeal to the judge to back him up, so outrageous did it seem to him, so incredible that Luska should dare claim that he was quick to take offence! He barely restrained an impulse to stand up and object out loud.

'You mean, I suppose, that he was envious. Please take your time to answer. Manu was of humble circumstances, like you. At school, many of your classmates were considerably more fortunate. In such cases, clans often form. Jealousies are born, which turn to hatreds.'

'What are you ...?' Manu began.

'Silence!' the judge yelled at him. 'Let the witness speak.'

For the first time, Manu was losing his temper, appealing to the whole room to bear witness to the enormity of what was happening. Unable to resign himself, he continued muttering under his breath.

'Silence!' the judge said again. 'Only the witness may speak.'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'Yes, what? Are you saying that – to use the prosecutor's word – your companion Manu was envious?'

‘Yes.’

Rogissart resumed:

‘According to your previous statements, which the accused in fact confirms, it was he who asked you to introduce him to your friends. Please try to remember. Starting that first evening, in other words, the evening of the accident, was Manu’s attitude towards Edmond Dossin, among others, provocative?’

‘It was obvious he didn’t like him!’

‘Right! *It was obvious he didn’t like him!* Did he demonstrate his antipathy in a more specific manner?’

‘He accused him of cheating.’

At times, Manu was so tense, it looked as if he was going to jump over the rail of the dock.

‘How did Dossin respond?’

‘He said it was true. He said he was the cleverest of us and Manu just had to become good enough to cheat like him.’

‘In the days that followed, did you see Manu often? You worked in the same street, didn’t you?’

‘The first two or three days ...’

‘What?’

‘He spoke to me. But then, as soon as things started with Nicole ...’

He was so feverish, you could clearly see his knees shaking through his uncreased trousers.

‘Please go on. We’re trying to get at the truth.’

‘He stopped bothering with us, not just me, the others too.’

‘In short, he had achieved his goal!’ Rogissart said decisively, rising smugly to his full height. ‘Thank you. No further questions, Your Honour.’

Slowly, Loursat got to his feet.

From the first words, the hostilities began.

‘Can the witness tell us how much pocket money his father gave him?’

As Luska, thrown by the question, turned quickly to Loursat, Rogissart made a movement in the direction of the judge.

Loursat explained the point:

‘What the prosecutor asked of the witness was not specific, objective information, but purely personal opinions. He will allow me to elucidate in my turn the personality of Ephraim Luska, known as Justin.’

He had hardly finished when Luska retorted:

‘I didn’t need to be given money. I earned it!’

‘Very good. May I ask how much you make at Prisunic?’

‘About four hundred and fifty francs a month.’

‘Which you keep for yourself?’

‘Out of which I give three hundred francs to my parents for my food and my laundry.’

‘How long have you been working like that?’

‘Two years.’

‘Do you have savings?’

His tone was aggressive, and Rogissart stirred again and bent forwards to be heard by the judge without raising his voice.

‘More than two thousand francs.’

Looking very pleased with himself, Loursat turned to the jury.

‘The witness, Ephraim Luska, has more than two thousand francs in savings, and he isn’t yet nineteen. He’s been working for two years.’

Then, once again aggressive:

‘Were you expected to dress yourself with your hundred and fifty francs?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you managed to dress yourself and still put about a hundred francs aside. Which means that all you had left was fifty francs for your everyday expenses. Do you also know how to cheat at poker?’

Luska had somewhat got out of his depth. He was unable to take his eyes off that moving mass, that hairy face from which questions shot out like cannon balls.

‘No.’

‘You don’t cheat at poker! Did you steal money from your parents’ till?’

Even Manu was astounded! Rogissart assumed an appropriate expression to show how superfluous, even shocking, this examination seemed to him and made a sign to the judge to intervene.

‘I never stole from my parents.’

The judge struck his desk with a paper knife, but Loursat didn’t hear.

‘How many times did you go out with Dossin and his friends? Don’t you know? Let’s see now. Think. Approximately thirty times? More than that? Forty? Between thirty and forty? And you drank like the others, I assume? In other words, more than four glasses in an evening ...’

The judge's voice rose at the same time as his and Loursat at last turned towards him, abruptly calm again.

'The prosecutor has pointed out to me that questions can only be asked of the witness through the judge. I therefore ask you, Maître Loursat, to—'

'Of course, Your Honour. In that case, would you be so kind as to ask the witness who paid for him?'

Somewhat put out, the judge repeated:

'Could you please tell the jury who paid for you?'

'I don't know.'

He was still looking resentfully at Loursat.

'Would you ask him, Your Honour, if his companion Manu paid his share?'

Rogissart had wanted procedure to be observed. Well, too bad! The judge was forced to comically repeat everything.

'... asks if Manu paid his share ...'

'Yes, with the money he stole!'

Ten minutes before, the courtroom had been calm, almost glum. Now everyone sensed a fight coming, or rather that it had already started, without anyone being aware of it. Because nobody understood what was going on. They all gazed with some amazement at Loursat, who had leaped to his feet and was now roaring out what still seemed like meaningless questions.

Manu's features had grown sharper. Was he at least starting to understand?

In the meantime, Luska, beneath his archangel's shock of hair, was feeling suddenly alone in the middle of this crowd.

'I'd like to know, Your Honour, if the witness has had girlfriends or mistresses.'

The question became even more absurd in the judge's immense mouth.

There was anger in the reply:

'No!'

'Was that because you were shy, didn't feel like it, or rather because you needed to save money?'

'Your Honour,' Rogissart protested, 'I think these questions—'

'Would you prefer me to put it another way, prosecutor? All right, let me dot the i's and cross the t's. Before Émile Manu was brought into the gang, was Ephraim Luska in love with Nicole?'

Silence. Luska could clearly be seen swallowing.

‘A witness told us yesterday that he was. You will soon observe that this question is of some importance. What I am trying to establish as of now is that Luska was a virgin and a loner, and tight with his money. He hadn’t had affairs, in which he rather resembles his friend Edmond Dossin, who only a few weeks ago went to a prostitute and asked her to initiate him in ...’

At this, there were protests. But Loursat stood his ground and faced them down. In vain, the judge struck the desk with his paper knife.

‘Answer me, Luska! When you approached Adèle Pigasse on the corner of Rue des Potiers a few days after the death of Big Louis, wasn’t that the first time you’d had relations with a woman?’

He didn’t move. He had turned pale, and his eyes remained wide open, unblinking.

‘The Pigasse girl, who was a regular at the Boxing Bar and plied her trade in the narrow streets in the area of the market, has been called a number of times, and I hope she’ll come to the stand before too long.’

‘Any further questions?’ the judge ventured.

‘Just a few, Your Honour. Would you ask the witness why suddenly, in the space of a few days, he felt the need to sleep with this girl several times?’

‘Did you hear the question?’

‘I don’t know who you’re talking about.’

As for Manu, he was no longer either seated or standing, but was holding on to the rail with both hands, leaning so far forwards that his buttocks had risen from the bench and one of the gendarmes was holding him back by the arm.

‘Would you ask the accused—’

He stopped dead, as Rogissart was already objecting.

‘I’m sorry! Would you be so kind, Your Honour, as to ask the witness what he told this girl one particular night when they were in bed together?’

It was important to keep his eyes fixed on the boy at all times. A moment’s respite, and he might get a grip on himself. There was a kind of ebb and flow in him, ups and downs, moments when he grew hard and angry, and others when he looked around for support.

‘I didn’t hear the answer, Your Honour.’

‘Please speak up, Luska.’

This time, it was Manu that Luska looked at, Manu who was breathing heavily, leaning forwards, apparently about to jump the hurdle.

‘I have nothing to say. This is all false.’

‘Your Honour,’ Rogissart intervened again.

‘Your Honour, I request permission to continue my cross-examination uninterrupted. Would you ask the witness if it’s true that on the night of the 7th of October, when Manu, alerted by the gunshot, reached the second-floor corridor, he, Luska, entered the attic just in time and stayed there for several hours, unable to move because the prosecutor’s department and the police were downstairs?’

Both Manu’s fists were clenched and must have been hurting him. In the middle of the courtroom, where nobody moved, Ephraim Luska, known as Justin, was the most motionless of all, as motionless as inert matter.

Everyone waited, respecting his silence. Loursat himself, who stood with his hand suspended in mid-air, seemed to be trying to hypnotize him.

At last, a voice that seemed to come from a distance said:

‘I wasn’t in the house.’

A sigh went through the courtroom, and it wasn’t a sigh of relief.

There was irony and impatience in the air. Everyone turned to Loursat and waited.

‘Can the witness tell us, under oath, that he was home in bed that night? Will he turn to Émile Manu and tell him—’

‘Silence!’ the judge screamed in exasperation.

Nobody had spoken. There had only been the sound of feet moving at the back of the room.

‘Since you don’t dare look Manu in the face ...’

But then he did. He turned abruptly and raised his head. Manu could hold out no longer: he sprang to his feet and cried, his features convulsed:

‘Murderer! Coward! Coward!’

His lips were quivering. He seemed to be on the verge of tears, or of a fit of hysterics.

‘Coward! Coward!’

They saw the shiver that ran through Luska, thought they could hear the chattering of his teeth. He was still all alone in a space that was too big and too empty.

How long was the wait? A few seconds? A few fractions of a second?

Then at last came the gesture that nobody had expected: Luska throwing himself full-length to the floor, his head in his arms, weeping, weeping ...

In the middle of the judge's face, that grotesque outsized doll's mouth again made it seem as if he was laughing.

Slowly, Loursat sat down again, searched for a handkerchief in the pocket of his robe, wiped his brow and eyes and said with a sigh to Nicole, who had turned pale:

'I've had enough!'

An ugly scene ensued: the judge pulling his robe about himself after asking his associates for their opinion, all those red and black robes fleeing, the jurors moving away reluctantly, still drawn to that body lying on the floor between two male lawyers and a female lawyer with dyed blonde hair.

Manu was being taken away and didn't know why. He too turned back, anxious and distressed.

Loursat remained where he was, heavy and sullen, sickened by all this hatred he had dredged up and brought to the surface: hatreds like that weren't even men's hatreds, but the hatreds of young people, sharper, more painful, more ferocious, based on humiliation and envy, a few francs of pocket money and shoes with holes in them!

'Do you think they'll order a further investigation?'

He glowered at the colleague who had asked him the question. Was that any concern of his? There was movement outside the courtroom. They were calling old magistrates to the rescue. Ducup was bustling about anxiously.

Only the public, afraid to lose their places, refused to move, still staring at the empty courtroom, but there was nothing to see now but Loursat sitting with his daughter.

'Don't you want to get a little fresh air, father?'

She was wrong. Too bad! He was thirsty, terribly thirsty. And he didn't care if they saw him rush off in his robe to the little bistro that served Beaujolais.

'Is it true that Luska has confessed?' the owner asked, serving him.

Oh, yes! And from now on everything would follow its natural course, all the confessions, all the details, including those they wouldn't ask him, that they'd prefer not to hear!

Hadn't the others understood that when he had thrown himself to the floor, it was out of weariness, because he wanted peace? And that the reason he had wept was relief?

At last, he was escaping the one-to-one conversation with himself, all the dirty truths he alone knew and that were going to become something else, a

drama, a real one, as people imagine dramas.

Enough of this unhealthy oppression, this constant humiliation, enough especially of fear!

Did he know yet why he had killed? It didn't matter any more! They would put it in a different way. They would translate it into decent language.

They would talk, for example, of jealousy, unrequited love, hatred for the rival who had taken Nicole from him, although he himself had never dared tell her of his love ...

It would become true, and almost beautiful!

Whereas up until then, when he was alone, mulling over his memories, it had been only the painful envy felt by a poor young man, Ephraim Luska, not even envy of the rich, envy of Dossin, whom he had resigned himself to serving, but of someone else like him, someone he had brought into the group, someone who sold books opposite him and who walked all over him without seeming to notice ...

'Same again!' Loursat said with a sigh.

What time was it? He had no idea. He was amazed to see a funeral pass in the street. On the pavement, there were people from the court, a few lawyers in their robes. Behind the hearse were other people in uniform, some of them in black. The two camps looked at each other curiously, like the servers of different ceremonies ...

In the courthouse, discussions were still going on, telephone calls being made. Red-robed lawyers dashed along the corridors. Doors slammed. The gendarmes responded to questions with shrugs.

Drops of purple wine in his beard, Loursat asked for another glass. Someone touched his arm.

'The judge is calling you, father.'

Sensing that he was hesitant to go, she looked at him imploringly.

'Just a minute.'

He emptied his third glass and searched in his pockets for change.

'You can pay later, Monsieur Loursat. You'll be in again, won't you?'

Poor Fine! She was showing such goodwill that her ugly face became almost attractive!

‘Monsieur really should come to the table ... Monsieur has to eat something ...’

She was finding it hard to be sad, in spite of the two bottles she could see on the desk, the cigarette ends strewn over the floor, the concentrated atmosphere of the study, so reminiscent of the bad old days.

Loursat was looking at her, bleary-eyed and colourless.

‘Yes ... No ... Tell them I’m tired, Fine.’

‘Monsieur Émile and his mother really would like to thank you.’

‘Yes, obviously!’

‘Shall I tell them you’re coming?’

‘No, tell them ... Tell them I’ll see them soon.’

Nicole, who had been expecting it, understood immediately when the Dwarf returned to the dining room. She made an effort to smile.

‘Please don’t be upset,’ she said to Madame Manu. ‘My father has been working very hard recently. He’s not like other men.’

Émile saw fit to declare:

‘He saved my life!’

Then, more simply:

‘He’s a nice man!’

Madame Manu was worried about sitting properly at the table, and she held herself all too well, too stiff and solemn.

‘It’s kind of you to have brought us here for dinner. Even though I’m as happy as I’ve ever been, I do think that if Émile and I had been alone in our little house, this would have been a sad evening.’

She felt like crying, for no reason.

‘If you knew how much I’ve suffered! When I think that my son—’

‘It’s over now, mother!’

He was still wearing his blue suit and polka-dot tie. The Dwarf prowled around them, serving them plentiful portions, as if to say:

‘Eat! After all you went through in prison ...’

Occasionally, Nicole listened out. Émile noticed and was almost jealous. He sensed that she wasn’t in the conversation, that she was thinking of something else, someone who wasn’t there.

‘What’s the matter, Nicole?’

‘Nothing, Émile.’

She was starting to wonder how formal or informal they had been with each other before. It struck her there was something abnormal today.

‘Did you tell him I’m leaving for Paris?’

‘Yes.’

‘What does he think?’

‘He thinks it’s a very good idea.’

‘Is he all right with you joining me and the two of us getting married as soon as I have a job?’

Why was he talking so much, and about such specific things? She was listening. Nothing could be heard but the wind in the chimney and the fork that Madame Manu held with her fingertips, just as she took little bites at her food, thinking it was refined.

‘I wonder how he managed to find it all out, and especially how he got him to confess.’

The veal they were eating was overcooked. The Dwarf had apologized for that: she’d had to do everything herself, having fired the maid for speaking ill of Mademoiselle.

‘Will you excuse me a moment?’

Nicole stood up, slipped out of the room and stopped in the dark corridor. She heard the door of the study close, followed by her father’s hesitant footsteps. She moved away a little and sank into a darker corner, and he passed close to her, as he had so often done before, without suspecting she was there.

Did he really not suspect? Why, in that case, was there a pause, a hesitation? He was breathing hard. He had always breathed like this, probably because of the wine. He went down the stairs, took his hat and coat and groped at the bolts.

Nicole didn’t move but stayed there a while longer. Then she tried to smile, since she was happy, and made her entrance into the dining room.

‘Serve the cheese, Fine.’

Meanwhile, Loursat was walking along the pavements, almost as wide as them. He didn’t know where he was going. He had thought of going out just as he was stoking the stove. He had stopped, looked around him and felt like a stranger in this setting that had so long been his. The books, the hundreds and thousands of books, the heavy air, the calm so absolute that you could hear yourself live ...

He sniffed as he walked, pretending not to know where he was heading. He even sneered, thinking of Rogissart and his wife, who must be quite upset, his brother-in-law Dossin, his sister who had almost certainly sent for Dr Matray.

He crossed Rue d’Allier, where they were playing billiards in a brasserie. You couldn’t see the players, because of the frosted-glass panes, but you could hear the clack of the balls, you could almost guess the moves.

It was while playing billiards that Ephraim Luska ...

And there was the shop, a narrow shop in the wing of an old house, with the kind of old-fashioned shutters you had to hook from the pavement to move up and down.

Light filtered out. The shop was dark, but the door to the kitchen, which served the Luska couple as both dining room and bedroom, was open, and that was where the glow came from.

From a house opposite a young man emerged, pleased to be going to the cinema.

Loursat couldn’t look through the keyhole, or knock at the door and tell the shopkeeper with the Bulgarian moustache:

‘If you’d allow me, I’d be happy to take on ...’

No! Enough! Nobody would understand! They’d take him for a madman! You don’t defend a man you’ve crushed in court! A man? Not even that! A potential man! A potential drama ...

He brushed past a policeman, who blinked and then shrugged on seeing him enter the Boxing Bar.

What did the officer imagine he was going there for?

‘I thought you’d show up, though I didn’t expect you today. About the note I sent you, I should explain. Apparently, Gène did something really stupid two months ago in Angoulême and if he was caught ... Hey, I’d have liked to be there when you tackled young Luska. They say you were scary

... What can I get you? ... No, I insist, my round. And I'll buy Monsieur Émile champagne when he comes to see me. He's got guts, that kid.'

Maybe it was because he'd lived too long alone, but Loursat was finding it hard to adapt. To get in the mood, he drank.

Then he told himself he'd be better elsewhere, at the Auberge aux Noyés, for example. All the drivers got to know him, after he started hailing them at night to drive him there.

Not that he felt any better at the inn. He even thought, as he passed the Dossins' house one evening when they were having a reception and saw it all lit up:

'What if I went in and said I've come to play bridge with the others?'

What he preferred was to go for a glass of cheap spirits with the old woman in the back alley, the one where the Dumbbell had her room and where Adèle Pigasse had finally returned, after Gène had thought it best to cross the border.

These were people who didn't talk much. You had your drink. You looked straight ahead. The words spoken were all the more significant for being rare and for the fact that those who uttered them knew more or less everything there was to know.

Adèle, since Gène's departure – he had sent her a postcard from Brussels – had been quite successful. Jo, whose bar wasn't doing well, talked about buying a fairground stand.

The streets in the evening, especially the narrow ones, were like the underbelly of the town, and you had the impression you were worming your way under the surface of other people's lives, hearing nothing of them but a vague drone.

The most annoying thing was that the Dwarf wanted to accompany Mademoiselle to Paris when she got married.

Which meant he would have to fight with girls like Angèle or with elderly maids who'd worked for priests!

An examining magistrate, who wasn't Ducup and who had just been appointed, often said:

'Loursat? He's definitely the man who knows the town and its secrets the best.'

Then, when people looked at him sternly:

'A pity that such a fine intelligence ...'

And they vaguely perceived, at the end of the sentence, the word:

‘... drink ...’

Like when that ventriloquist’s dummy had recited in court:

‘... swear ... help ... God ... raise your ... turn to the jury ...’

Luska got ten years. His mother died, and his father continued selling marbles in a shop that smelt ever stronger.

A glossy five-colour postcard of an erupting Vesuvius arrived, with on the back the words:

Love from Naples

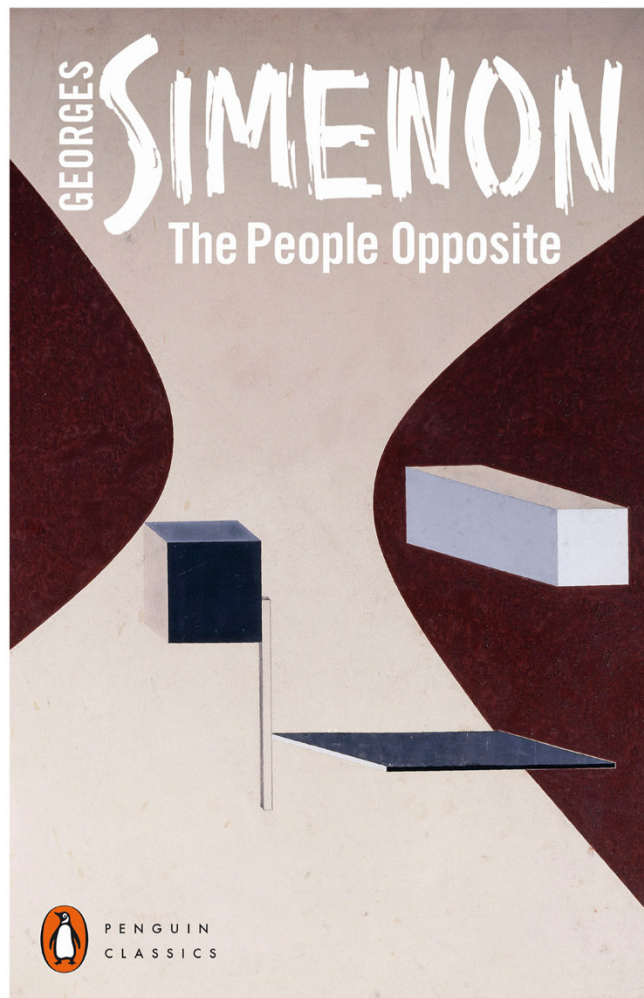
Nicole Émile

And Edmond Dossin was in a luxury sanatorium. Destrivieux had been appointed master sergeant, Ducup was in Versailles, Rogissart in Lourdes for three days as a volunteer stretcher bearer. The elder Dossin in some stylish brothel surrounded by girls, young Daillat married to the daughter of a phosphate merchant.

Adèle and the Dumbbell on their pavement.

And Loursat, all alone, still dignified, in a bistro, over a glass of red wine.

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‘Oh my word! You have white bread!’

As the Persian couple walked into the lounge, the consul’s wife went into raptures at the sight of the table laden with sandwiches, temptingly arranged.

Yet hardly a minute earlier, Adil Bey had been told:

‘There are just three consulates in Batumi, yours, the Persians’ and ours. But the Persians are beyond contempt.’

The speaker had been Signora Pendelli, wife of the Italian consul, while her husband, sprawling in an armchair, was smoking a thin pink-tipped cigarette. The two women now greeted each other with smiles in the middle of the lounge, at the very moment when sounds from the sun-baked town, until then barely audible, became louder: suddenly a marching band burst into view at the corner of the street.

So everyone went out on to the veranda to watch the procession.

The only newcomer present was Adil Bey, and he was so recent that he had arrived in Batumi that very morning. At the Turkish consulate, he had found a single official from Tbilisi holding the fort.

The official, who would be leaving again that night, had brought Adil Bey along to the Italian consulate, to introduce him to his two colleagues.

The band was getting louder all the time. The brass instruments glinted in the sun as they moved along. The tune was not exactly jaunty, but nonetheless quite brisk, making everything vibrate, the air, the houses, the town.

Adil Bey noticed that the Persian consul had gone over to the fireplace to join the Tbilisi official, and that the two men were talking in low voices.

Then his eye was caught again by the procession, since behind the brass band he had spotted a coffin, painted bright red, carried on the shoulders of six men.

‘It’s a funeral?’ he asked naively, turning to Signora Pendelli.

She had to pinch her lips not to laugh, he looked so taken aback.

It was indeed a funeral, the first that Adil Bey had seen in the USSR. The bandsmen were dressed as if for a gymnastic club, in white, with espadrilles on their feet and a large scarlet cockade on each chest. The coffin was crudely made and painted, but it was a dazzling red.

The crowd behind it appeared to be the usual people who follow a band, some in shirt-sleeves or pullovers, the women barelegged and in white cotton dresses. Only two men were clad in jacket and tie, important officials no doubt; many heads were shaved; and bringing up the rear came a young man on a shiny new bicycle, zigzagging from side to side so as not to lose his balance, now and then resting his hand on the shoulder of a girl alongside him.

As they passed the consulate, each of them looked up at the foreigners on the veranda.

‘What are they thinking?’ Adil Bey murmured.

The Persian woman, who had overheard him, replied cynically:

‘That we will be eating white bread!’

She laughed. The men walking below in the street saw her laugh. Their expressions did not change. They carried on. They were following the band and the red coffin. It was impossible to tell whether they were glad or sad, and Adil Bey, feeling awkward, retreated to the lounge.

‘Have you visited the town?’

This was the Persian woman, who had followed him inside.

‘No, I haven’t seen anything yet.’

‘It’s a hole!’

She was looking him straight in the eye: her own dark eyes were the most insolent that the Turkish consul had ever seen. Never had anyone scrutinized him like this before, as if he were an object being sized up with a view to acquiring it. The worst of it was that she allowed her feelings to be visible on her face. He could sense quite well what she was thinking:

‘Not bad, but not up to much, a bit simple perhaps.’

Finally, she said out loud:

‘You realize that we’re doomed to live together for months, years maybe? There are just six of us, if you count John from Standard Oil, but he’s always drunk. By the way, my dear, is John not coming?’

Everyone was moving indoors, while the tail-end of the procession disappeared down the street. The air was still quivering. The heat was oppressive.

‘You’re going?’ asked Signora Pendelli in surprise.

Since the official from Tbilisi was making his farewells.

‘My train leaves in an hour.’

‘And you too?’ the Italian woman asked, turning to the Persian consul.

‘Will you excuse me for a moment, I’ll be back. I need to have a word with him.’

Adil Bey was far too newly arrived to play any part in the activity around him. He found himself with a cup of tea in his hand, sitting in an armchair between the two women, the Italian and the Persian, while Pendelli sat opposite him, wheezing slightly, since he was overweight and the heat troubled him.

The lounge was large, with carpets, paintings on the walls and assorted furniture, like all consular lounges. A tray held sandwiches, cakes and a bottle of vodka. The bay window opened on to the sun-drenched veranda, and hot gusts of air wafted into the room the atmosphere of the empty street. Signora Pendelli’s teacup tinkled as it met the saucer, and Pendelli sighed and murmured:

‘Do you speak Russian?’

The question did not seem to be addressed to anyone, since he was looking at the sandwiches, but Adil Bey replied:

‘Not a word.’

‘Just as well.’

‘Why is it just as well?’

‘Because they prefer consuls who don’t speak Russian. That’s one point in your favour, at least.’

Pendelli spoke condescendingly, like a man preening himself for taking so much trouble. The Persian woman carried on scrutinizing Adil Bey. Signora Pendelli, acting her part as hostess, wore a vague smile.

‘Of course, your flour is brought here by boat, isn’t it?’

It seemed to Adil Bey that the band was approaching again, but this time from behind the building. The Persian woman carried on, as if she were saying something insulting:

‘We can’t all be the Italian consul and see a boatload arrive every week! And it must be amusing to dine on board ship, and then receive the officers

back here.'

'One tires of it,' said Signora Pendelli, pouring tea for Adil Bey.

But the latter unfortunately asked:

'Are there no Turkish ships arriving here?'

Pendelli shifted in his armchair. He moved only slightly, without any purpose, but was visibly about to say something.

'The Turks have ships, then?'

He was not laughing. His lips were parted and his eyes half-closed.

Adil Bey did not yet know what would happen, but already his eyes were shining and his cheeks flushed.

'What do you mean?'

Signora Pendelli was putting two lumps of sugar into the cup. Pendelli assumed a jovial air.

'No offence intended. But the idea of a Turk in charge of a ship ...'

'We're all savages, are we?'

It had been a sudden outburst. Adil Bey was on his feet. Objects and faces had become blurred in his sight.

'No, of course not! Do sit down. You stopped chopping heads off ten years ago.'

Signora Pendelli smiled condescendingly.

'Your tea, Adil Bey.'

'No thank you, madam.'

'My husband is joking, I assure you.'

'That may be, but I'm not. Yes, I know we are a young republic. We may still make a few mistakes, but ...'

'But you want people to treat you as if you're the greatest nation in the world!'

By this time, no one could have said how it had started. The Persian consul had silently returned to the room.

'Come over here, Amar! Our new friend didn't get the joke and he's so amusing when he's angry. By the way, Adil Bey, do you play bridge?'

'No.'

And he added fiercely:

'That's too sophisticated a game for a Turk.'

Signora Pendelli tried to soothe him.

'I promise you that my husband ...'

‘Your husband thinks Italy is the only country in the world! He thinks Turkey is still full of harems, eunuchs, cemeteries and men in red fezes.’

‘How old are you?’ the Persian woman asked with a smile.

He replied, still hostile:

‘Thirty-two. And I fought for my country in the Dardanelles, then for the Republic in Asia Minor. And I will never allow anyone to say in front of me ...’

‘Where were you born?’ asked Pendelli, who had just lit another cigarette.

‘In Salonika.’

‘That’s not in Turkey any more. Apparently, the Greeks have made a beautiful city of it.’

Adil Bey could hardly breathe. Unable to remember where the door was, he walked straight towards a cupboard. Madame Amar could not hold back a burst of laughter, and he looked at her so furiously that she had to wipe her eyes with a handkerchief.

Until he was in the street, Adil Bey was aware of nothing. He scarcely noticed Signora Pendelli, who had followed him out and in the corridor put a hand on his shoulder, saying with a little pout:

‘You really mustn’t take anything my husband says seriously. He’s such a tease.’

He grabbed his hat and plunged out into the sunlight. The streets felt as hot as an oven. For a good quarter of an hour, he walked without purpose, seeing nothing, nursing his wrath. Then he tried to reconstruct the exchange. Impossible. But he could summon up images, above all Pendelli, flabby and overweight, sprawling in his armchair and smoking his ridiculous women’s cigarettes. Didn’t he exude arrogance? He had a beautiful house with a terrace, a lounge and even a grand piano, which his wife probably played. He served delicate sandwiches, as they did in Europe. With white bread.

And he thinks the Persians are beyond contempt, said Adil Bey to himself.

In fact, he didn’t like the Persians either. Madame Amar had irritated him by her way of examining him from head to toe. As for the consul, he had said nothing. He was a thin man, unremarkable, with a small brown moustache, a badly cut suit and polished shoes.

‘They did this on purpose, receiving me like that!’

It was a rest day, which in Russia comes after five working days. As he approached the port, Adil Bey met people walking along the streets, and gradually, in spite of his anger, he started to look at his surroundings.

But he was the one being stared at. When they met him, everyone turned round and followed him with their eyes for a long while. What was so extraordinary about him?

The sky was now a darker red, the shadows a deeper blue. It must be at least eight o'clock. The crowd was all heading in one direction and Adil Bey, following it, found himself at the port. The whole town, it seemed, had come to the quayside and the atmosphere was one of tumultuous life compared to the emptiness of the streets. A band was still playing somewhere. A ship had just arrived from Odessa. Hundreds of passengers were streaming ashore and hundreds of other people were watching them go past.

The sky and the sea were purple. The masts were black stalks. Boats bobbed up and down silently.

Men and women continually brushed up against Adil Bey, staring at him brazenly. There were even some little boys trailing after him to see him better.

For a moment, now and then, he could forget about the Italian consul and try to orientate himself in space.

To both right and left of the bay, the horizon was bounded by mountains, and straight ahead was the long promenade where the townspeople had flocked to walk. In the harbour itself, seven or eight boats, more perhaps, sat as if painted into the calm surface of the water.

As for the town, behind the port, its narrow streets stretched out for ever, unevenly cobbled or not paved at all, their houses in poor repair.

Adil Bey was thirsty. He saw a kind of bar at the waterside, and sat down at a table. A waiter was moving round, serving beers and lemonade. People paid with paper roubles. Adil Bey realized that he did not yet have any Russian currency, so he left.

The streetlamps were coming on, and the green and red sidelights of the ships at anchor.

Some Italian sailors walked past, accompanied by women wearing sandals. The young man on the bike was cycling slowly along, with a girl sitting on the crossbar. Because of the crowd, he had to wheel and turn.

The air was cool. A fine mist was moving down towards the foot of the mountains.

The sound of music got louder, as it had when the funeral had reached the street, but this was not the funeral procession.

A large new building loomed up, with a windowed façade. All the doors and windows were open. Young people, men and women, were sitting on the sills, and inside could be seen paper streamers, portraits of Lenin and Stalin, and propaganda posters.

This was the house that was pulsating with music: in one of the ground-floor rooms, its wall covered with graphs, men in shirt-sleeves were listening to a comrade who was speaking and thumping the table with his fist.

It was not only the music that reminded him of the funeral. There was something in common between the attitude of the people, those following the coffin and those at the windows or listening to the orator, something that made Adil Bey think he would never understand it. But what was it? Not so much their clothing, which reminded him of a fellowship or a youth club. Most of them were dressed in white, the men in open-necked shirts. Many heads were shaved. The women were not wearing stockings, but mostly short socks, turned down at the ankle, and cotton dresses in light colours.

Why did they all seem so foreign to him, even the people in the street, who turned to go back when they reached the statue of Lenin – a bronze Lenin, short and stocky, clad in baggy trousers, his feet on a ball representing the globe? There was a striking contrast between that dark man, so small, and these tall youths, these girls in summer dresses, as they walked past again and again, staring at Adil Bey and bursting out laughing.

‘How did that quarrel start?’ he asked himself once more.

Now he was depressed. He felt lonely. Fikret, the official who had been standing in at the consulate, had returned to Tbilisi and, in any case, he had been unfriendly. He had barely uttered a word of welcome to the consul.

‘You’ll find everything the way it was when I got here, a month ago, after the death of your predecessor.’

‘How did he die?’

The official did not wish to answer that.

‘The secretary will be in tomorrow morning. She knows about things. She’s Russian, of course.’

‘Should I be wary of her?’

The other man had shrugged his shoulders. Surely, he should have provided some explanation – since they were from the same country? And helped Adil Bey sort out his immediate practical needs?

He realized suddenly that he had no idea even where he would eat. He had seen a serving woman in the kitchen and also a man whose function he did not know. Were these his domestic staff?

And who could he ask now? He had quarrelled with the Italians and no doubt, by the same token, with the Persians.

He carried on following the crowd, from the statue of Lenin to the oil refinery. Near the fishing port there were a few new houses surrounded by waste patches and there, on the ground, were a number of men, women and children, sitting or lying down. These were not the same people as at the funeral, or in the big building, or even in the crowds walking around. They looked dirty and depressed. Adil Bey heard a few words of Turkish spoken, and became aware that they were uttered by the most wretched of people, dressed in rags and lying in the dust like gypsies.

He had walked past them, but turned round and, standing beside them, asked:

‘Are you Turkish?’

A few heads were raised, with indifference. Eyes scanned him from head to foot. Then, equally slowly, the faces turned away. And yet these people spoke the same language as him!

He must look stupid standing in their midst, and he felt both shame and anger.

He had walked all the way along the quayside and back six or seven times now. The crowd was thinning out. It was a little after ten. In a niche, several women were huddled and one of them stepped forward to face him, then rejoined the others.

‘Signora Pendelli must be more intelligent than her husband,’ he thought.

But what was the point? She would be of no assistance to him now. He came once more to the windows thronged with youths and girls. For a few minutes, he walked along with the music ringing in his ears.

He wondered how his predecessor had died. Who had he been? And how old?

Twice, he lost his way trying to return to the consulate. The streets were all alike: roadways hollowed out by rain and waste water, abandoned piles of cobblestones, and doors opening on to dark entries.

At last, he recognized the building on the first floor of which he was to live. There was no light on the stairs. He bumped into a couple embracing and stammered his apologies.

He had a key. As soon as he stepped inside, he sensed that the apartment was empty, which gave him a start. Back there in the Italian consulate, people were chatting casually in a well-lit lounge, around sandwiches and glasses of vodka. Madame Amar's perfume had been enough to make the atmosphere seem feminine.

'Is anyone there?' he called into the darkness, as he tried to find a light switch. From a single naked bulb, a mournful light showed up his surroundings, and he saw the antechamber, with its two benches, its walls plastered with official notices, and its smell of poverty.

The next room was his office. Then, to the left, was a sort of dining room. A marble-topped café table drew his attention, and he did not realize at once why. But a memory returned. That morning, he had seen a gramophone and some records sitting there. Now the gramophone had disappeared. As had the Turkish rug covering the divan.

'Nobody here?' he called again, in a shaky voice.

No, nobody, not in his bedroom, nor in the kitchen where a single tap overhung a dirty sink.

Everything was grimy, walls, ceilings, furniture, papers, all covered with the depressing kind of dirt to be found in a barracks or certain administrative offices. There was nothing to eat in the store cupboard, and the lunch plates had not been washed up.

'Why was he so scornful about Turkey?' he muttered to himself, as he searched for somewhere to sit down.

He saw once more Signora Pendelli's elegant hand holding the sugar tongs over his teacup. She was rather good-looking, Signora Pendelli. Her blue silk dress exaggerated the curves of her figure, since she was on the plump side. Her lips too were full, and her teeth very white. But above all, she carried herself, in the consular lounge, with the confidence of a woman of the world.

'Not like that swarthy little Persian woman!'

Bold as brass, with skin as firm as an olive, and she probably threw herself at all the men!

Adil Bey did not even know where his bed was. He had not had time earlier to unpack his luggage. He drank some water from the tap, and found

it had a chemical taste.

Footsteps could be heard from the floor above. He looked out of the window and saw a couple leaning their elbows on the opposite window-sill, taking the air in the darkness, without speaking.

As there were no curtains in the consulate, they could see everything Adil Bey did. Had there been curtains this morning? He couldn't remember. He was just trying to find somewhere to settle when all the lights went out at once, not only in the apartment but in the street as well.

The couple opposite were still at the window, since he did not sense any movement from their direction. And indeed, by and by, Adil Bey could make out the man's white shirt, and the pale outlines of their faces.

The lights did not come on again. It wasn't a power cut. The electricity was switched off officially every evening at midnight. Footsteps echoed in the street nearby. The cry of an animal. A cat or a dog.

Did the Italian consulate have no power supply either? If so, they would at least have some oil lamps prepared. Adil Bey, being a non-smoker, did not even have any matches!

Feeling desperate, he glanced around as a vague twilight gradually infiltrated the darkness, emanating from a sky in which white clouds were floating.

All he could do was go to sleep. He lay down fully dressed on the divan, then gave a start as a moonbeam moved on to his face. Had he dropped off? He didn't know. He hurried to the window. Peering at the house opposite, he saw first a bright glow of light, from a cigarette, then a shirt-sleeve, the curve of an arm and a man's head, with next to him a woman who had unpinned her hair on to her shoulders. The moonlight filtered into the shadows and, behind the couple, Adil Bey could just glimpse a white rectangle, the double bed.

'They can see me,' he thought. 'They can't fail to see me!'

Out of bravado, he pressed his face against the windowpane, without wondering whether, with his nose squashed against the glass, he looked threatening or comical.



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First published as *Les Inconnus dans la maison* by Éditions Gallimard 1940

First published in Penguin Classics 2021

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2021

ISBN: 978-0-141-99552-6

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